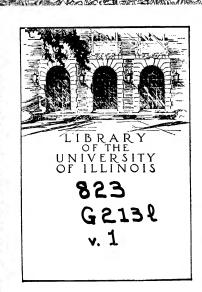
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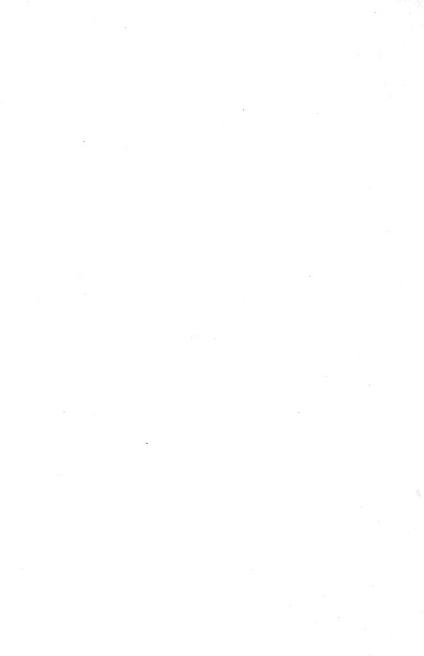
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A LION AMONG THE LADIES.

A NOVEL.

BY

PHILIP GASKELL,

AUTHOR OF "THE SENIOR MAJOR," ETC.

"A lion among ladies is a most dreadful thing; for there is not a more fearful wild fowl than your lion living."

Midsummer Night's Dream.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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A LION AMONG THE LADIES.





A LION AMONG THE LADIES.

CHAPTER I.

THE ADJUTANT GIVES ADVICE.

"

OW, look here, my boy, this kind of thing won't do. I've been a good deal longer in the Service than you have, and have seen more than one young fellow come to grief, and that simply because he has been a fool, and wouldn't take advice. Now if you don't pull up in time, it vol. I.

will be a case, either of exchanging into what you chaps call a red regiment, or of making tracks for the Colonies."

The utterer of this premonishment was an officer dressed in the uniform of the First Battalion of the Chalkshire Rifles, and the locality in which he spoke was his own room, in the field-officers' quarters of the Broadmere Barracks. Captain Elphinstone—for so the officer was named -had, during two years been Adjutant of the regiment, and was known as one of its smartest as well as steadiest officers. He was a general favourite, especially with the junior officers of the battalion, for though sufficiently well favoured, he was no "beauty man,"-no "Lion amongst the ladies" (such as was Guy Leycester of "Ours"), whose attractions threw into the shade those of the younger soldiers who naturally aspired to producing a sensation amongst the fair sex. A "sharp fellow," too, as they all agreed, was old "Elphy," and "one who could put men up to a dodge or two when he chose," was the involuntary compliment paid by these thoughtless boys to the experienced man of the world who, taking pity on them for their youth and folly, gave them good advice, and was not extreme to mark what was done by them amiss.

The second Lieutenant, with whom Rowley Elphinstone was good-naturedly holding colloquy, had been endowed by nature with a handsome face, and a slim, graceful figure; but, although good enough to look at, Alfred Durant was, at the age of twenty, decidedly, in the matter of sense and experience, below

the average of his fellow subs. He was the only son of a doting and widowed mother, and as he had not been allowed to gain the teaching of worldly knowledge which a public school affords, the unlucky young man too often laid himself open, by reason of the simplicity and ignorance which he displayed, to the merciless chaffings of his comrades.

The Broadmere Barracks stood, even as they stand now, upon an eminence of some considerable height. The view from that height is extensive, and not devoid of attraction. The country in the midst of which the town of Broadmere stands, cannot claim for itself the merit of being beautified by woodland scenery. No meadows, rich in their lush grasses, and not a single cultivated field, meet the eyes of the two men who,

seated near an open window in Captain Elphinstone's barrack-room, are looking out upon a land of "rock and fell," upon precipitous and barren headlands, and on a mere or loch, along the shores of which there is no fringe of wooded verdure to refresh the eye, and reflect on breezeless days, their leafy beauties upon the water's bosom.

Situated in what may almost be called a northern county, the town of Broadmere owes it present prosperous existence to the discovery—in the towering headlands before mentioned—of valuable minerals. The extensive coal mines which were worked in a neighbouring county tended greatly to the lucrative development of the mineral trade. Capital flowed with astonishing rapidity into Broadmere. From an insignificant vil-

lage, it grew in a few years to be a mighty town, and, with its dimensions, wickedness, as a natural consequence, increased also. In process of time, therefore, and because of the crimes and misdemeanours which, as the result of its size, multiplied exceedingly, the presence of soldiers in the big manufacturing city of Broadmere was imperatively called for; and thus it came about that extensive barracks were, on an eminence outside the town, erected, and that in those barracks Captain Rowley Elphinstone, and his subaltern Alfred Durant, were, one morning in early spring, holding somewhat serious converse. They were seated, the older man in a luxurious armchair, and the younger on the broad cushioned seat of the one large window that gave -ight and air to the barrack-room.

"Look here, my boy," the Captain was saying, "I hate to see a young fellow of your age making a downright ass of himself; and, as I said before, if you go on as you've begun, imitating chaps who have double and treble your means, and ten times your experience, take my word for it, you'll come to grief."

Young Durant, over whose boyish cheek a blush had stolen, had to pull himself together before replying to his mentor's warnings; then he said, a trifle sheepishly,—

"I don't know who you mean, Captain.
I was not aware of having imitated anybody. I have given ladies a few flowers, and ridden out early" (this with an exaggeration of the celestial rosy red with which his beardless face had been, to his credit, tinged) "a few

times with the same lady, while other men—Guy Leycester, for instance, who's got no end of kites flying, gives women lots of splendid jewellery. I saw a bracelet that he had ordered for Mrs Denham, that couldn't have cost less than twenty sovs., and what I send to Lady Gregorie—the flowers, I mean—only stand me in a pound or so."

At the mention of Guy Leycester's name, a frown of mingled pain and anger had contracted the Captain's brow. He and the brother officer whose misdoings had thus been, without "malice prepense," alluded to, had for years been the closest and most attached of friends. A few years senior to Guy, and gifted with far more strength of mind and steadiness of purpose than nature had bestowed upon the younger man, Rowley

Elphinstone had welcomed with joy into the ranks of his own regiment the lad whom he had known from boyhood as brave, lovable, and true. A more intimate knowledge, however, of his friend, when the latter had progressed from youth to manhood, served somewhat to modify Rowley's satisfaction in the appointment of his fidus Achates to the Chalkshire Rifle Regiment. was to no diminution of the admirable qualities with which the older man had credited the young subaltern that this result was due, for these, to Rowley Elphinstone's thinking, remained intact; but there were other proclivities—other tastes and tendencies, which were to the manner born in Guy, and the rapid development of which filled the mind of his watchful friend with ever-grow-

ing anxiety. The characters of regiments differ from each other as much as do the idiosyncrasies of individuals, and the one which the Chalkshire Rifles had long since earned for itself, was that of being "fast," "smart," and "dashing." The Colonel, Sir Wilfred Gregorie, was a man of fortune, whose pride was in the regiment he commanded, and it pleased him that his officers should be possessed both of liberal means, and a talent such as he himself evinced, for expenditure and show. He objected, he had been heard to say, to having fellows in the regiment who had not money enough to do it credit, and thence it followed that too many foolish youths followed not only their own inclinations, but the example set them by the Colonel, and plunged into the

various extravagances which lead eventually to ruin.

Guy Leycester's early antecedents were not such as to render him proof against the manifold temptations which, as a handsome, popular young soldier, beset his path. His mother, Lady Alicia Leycester, was a fine lady, a woman of the world, and one of the most careless of mothers; whilst his father, an admiral and a K.C.B., had always, during his sixty years of honourable existence, lived in the blessed belief that no son of his, could, by such disgraceful acts as he was told were daily perpetrated by young men of family, bring his grey hairs in shame and sorrow to the grave. To what extent, and in what a disastrous fashion. the fine old sailor deceived himself, remains hereafter to be seen. I have

already hinted at Elphinstone's distress of mind as the inborn propensities of the youth whom he had loved as a brother only too rapidly made themselves apparent; and when the weak-minded lad whose fall into the depths of debt and ill-doing the kind-hearted Captain was endeavouring to avert, quoted Guy Leycester's unprincipled conduct as being in some sort an excuse, Rowley Elphinstone's indignation was only equalled by his regret. It was terrible to reflect that this boy-this child—in the old days that were gone by—of his affections, should now, through means partly of his very attractiveness, have become a snare, and an occasion of falling to the young and inexperienced amongst his fellows. It was this latter feeling which induced him to say, with a severity of manner to which the youngsters of the regiment were totally unaccustomed, and to which Alf Durant listened with a certain amount of awe,—

"I am sorry that you have thought it necessary to mention any names, and to accuse absent persons of acts of which they may or may not have been guilty. As regards your own conduct, I confess that it recalls to my mind that of a young and simple-minded boy-officer of hussars, who, on being advised by his good-natured Colonel to refrain from paying openly-marked attentions to a married lady, replied, 'But, sir, if I didn't pay them openly, no one would know that I pay them at all.' The object of a lad of your age, when he sends flowers to a lady, and in other ways endeavours to show to the world that he adores her, is in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the

gratification of his own vanity, and his reward usually, and very justly, consists of ridicule on the part of lookers-on at his egregious folly. By the way, my dear boy, I must, whilst talking of ladies generally, caution you against mentioning any by name. In this respect you would do well to imitate the example of such men as Captain Leycester. With men of the world-gentlemen, I should say-of his sort, the names of the women of their acquaintance are never allowed, in connection with attentions paid to them, to pass their lips; and when a few more years have rolled over your head, you will perhaps acknowledge the wisdom to say nothing of its being a case where a man's honour is concerned-of following my advice in this matter."

"Well, old fellow, you've had a wigging, I expect," said a young brother officer of Durant's, who chanced to meet that somewhat crestfallen youth in the corridor leading to the mess-room. "The Adjutant's been trying his hand at making a good boy of you, eh? Do you feel like the sort of thing?—renouncing the devil and all his works, and living henceforth in the odour of sanctity?"

"There was nothing said about sanctity," answered Alf, as he affectionately linked his arm within that of his brother sub. "Old Elphinstone doesn't set up for being a saint. What he preaches against is running in debt; but I should like to know how a fellow who has no more by way of an allowance than a miserable two hundred a year, can help doing that."

So spoke (and, I grieve to say, without

one twinge of remorse for his ingratitude) the lad who, only one short year before, had listened with words of heartfelt, and eager protest to the unselfish plans of his widowed mother, and two young and pretty sisters, for their only brother's fancied good. With what more than readiness had they vied with each other in the sacrifice of some daily luxury and comfort—or, as indeed it might almost be called, some "necessity"—in order to render possible the object of their dear one's ambition; and now, alas! this only son of a widow, this child of many prayers, was being carried rapidly away by the force of evil example, and had more than begun to tread the downward path which leads to ruin, and perchance disgrace!



CHAPTER II.

GUY LEYCESTER OF "OURS."

racks is a handsome square, and in that square there stands a gorgeously-furnished house, which its owner, a wealthy retired merchant in coals and iron, had, as a great favour (according to his own showing), consented to let, during the stay of the Rifles in Broadmere, to the Colonel of the regiment. The rent demanded, and without much shilly-shallying on Sir Wilfred's part, agreed to, was exvol. I.

travagantly high, for, in the opinion of the owner, who had expended many of his hard - earned thousands in gilding and ornamentation, the mansion was a very temple of magnificence and beauty. Lady Gregorie, however, thought otherwise. Her tastes, although fully as expensive as those of the Broadmere tradesman, were infinitely simpler; and after taking possession of her new abode, many days were expended by her in hiding away not a few splendid specimens of Broadmere elegance, and substituting for them many really pretty things, as well as more tasteful decorations, of her own choosing.

"I assure you the drawing-rooms were too ghastily dreadful when first we took possession," the Colonel's handsome wife would say to her afternoon

visitors, "and even now it is only just possible to live in them;" and her lady-ship, looking lovely in one of Worth's most simple yet most costly tea-gowns, leant back in an arm-chair which Gillow had sent from his London repository, and felt that the hundreds she had expended in newly modelling her temporary home had not been thrown away in vain.

Sir Wilfred was both proud and fond of his wife. She was very ornamental, entirely to be trusted, and easy to live with. He enjoyed seeing the admiration she inspired, and thought it good fun when the boys of the regiment fell down—metaphorically speaking—at her feet and worshipped her. The Colonel was one of the last men living to see with complacency, jewels, which were

the gifts of aspirants to her favour, adorning the neck and arms of his wife; but the case of offerings at beauty's shrine made in the guise of flowers by his boy officers, was another affair altogether; and while his wife accepted with an amused smile these juvenile tributes to her beauty, he could afford to look on unmoved at play so innocent of harm. He had in his salad days been guilty of many such follies, and it never occurred to him that more than one of the foolish young fellows who paid their five or ten shillings—as the case might be—for the flowers which decorated his fair wife's drawing-room, might be the gifts of spendthrifts who did not possess five shillings which they could legitimately call their own.

On the morning following the day when Captain Elphinstone had bestowed the rarely-appreciated gift of good advice upon Alfred Durant, Sir Wilfred, on entering his wife's boudoir, found her engaged in the pleasant occupation of arranging in vases a profusion of various coloured roses. They lay on the table before her, "thick as leaves in Vallombrosa," crimson, pale yellow, pink, and ivory white, whilst her delicate, slim hand moved lightly amongst the blossoms, picking and choosing those which seemed to her, best suited to be grouped together.

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed the Colonel, as he sauntered towards the table. "You have been well supplied to-day. Which of the pet idiots sent you these?"

Without ceasing from her occupation,

and with an air of perfect unconcern, Lady Gregorie answered the question put to her.

"The idiot at present in question," she said, "is young Durant, and I am going to tell him not to spend his money so foolishly again. These roses must have cost a fortune."

"Which he has not, and never will have," said the Colonel. "Between ourselves, Flo, young Durant and his chum Fuller are going rapidly to the bad, and the sooner the finale comes, the better for them. Durant is in debt right and left to the trades-people, and both he and Fuller are in with the money-lenders. They are no credit to the regiment, and the sooner they are out of it, the better I shall be pleased."

Florence Gregorie, although vain and

a flirt, is not devoid of kindly feelings. She is sorry for young Durant, and lifting a pair of dark, languid eyes to the Colonel's face, makes a feeble effort in favour of the condemned one.

"I'm distressed, dear, at what you tell me," she says calmly. "Durant is a nice boy."

"The greatest muff I ever happened to come across," breaks in Sir Wilfred.

"I daresay; but I know something, through the Lennards, about his people, and his mother and sisters will be in despair if he comes to grief. They have pinched themselves in all sorts of ways for what they thought his good; and, after all, as I said before, he is nice, and a gentleman, which—from what I have heard you say—young Fuller is not."

"On the contrary, he is an unmitigated snob, and Durant must have deuced bad taste to get so intimate with him. There are subs of a better sort in the regiment with whom he might have made friends."

"Ah, but he is so young! Not twenty, and to have been got hold of already by the Jews! Couldn't you, dear Wilfred," persists Flora, "give him a few words of advice?"

The Colonel, a fine soldier-like looking man, of a little over forty years of age, is standing with his hands in his pockets, and his back to the fireless grate. At his wife's last words he breaks into a laugh.

"Couldn't I." he, with sarcastic humour asks, "read, like old Gladstone, the lessons in St Andrew's Church on Sunday? No, no; I leave the lecturing department to Elphinstone. He has taken more than one turn at Durant, and might as well have talked to the winds. If a young fellow is bent on going to the devil, go he will, and there's no use in trying to stop him."

Lady Gregorie, with a little sigh of regret, resumed her occupation. She had got accustomed to the attentions of Alf Durant, and would miss, she thought, his good-looking, boyish face from among her visitors. The roses, too, with which her fingers were toying were his gift, and she felt unwilling to abandon his cause as hopeless.

"I think you are hard upon him, dear Wil," she said; "so much harder, too, than you are upon others who have not half his excuse for being extravagant, and in debt. Look at Guy Leycester. From what I have been told, he owes hundreds of pounds, where Durant has only run in debt for shillings."

The utterance of Guy Leycester's name, called up an angry flush on Sir Wilfred's cheek. He had never felt any real jealousy of his handsome wife's admirers; but there had been a time—passed away now, and wellnigh forgotten — when he had not seen without some slight sensations of annoyance, betrayals in the tactics of Captain Guy Leycester of a desire to add the Colonel's admired wife to the number of those who, according to report, had loved him "not wisely but too well." But in addition to this cause, if cause indeed it were, for the evident annoyance which the

mention of Guy Leycester's name by his pretty, thoughtless Florence gave to Sir Wilfred, there was the circumstance that - reckless spendthrift, and unprincipled Lothario though the junior Captain was known to be-his Colonel had less than no wish that he (the offender) should be driven by stress of circumstances to leave the regiment. Leycester's good looks and birth, his air of high breeding, and his great and universal popularity, had concurred to render him—as a wag had once been heard to remark—the "show man" of the Chalkshire Rifles. It was true, feared the Colonel—who, after all, possessed only a very partial knowledge of the truth—that Guy's utter ruin was only an affair of time. His debts, gambling ones included, had been several times paid by the Admiral; but even parental endurance has its limits, whilst the holders of the prodigal's bills had never evinced any signs of waiting with kindly forbearance for the better times to which their sanguine creditor was in the habit of alluding. Nor were the "rascally" London tradesmen, whose name was legion, and who had been guilty of the self-seeking folly of giving fashionable Lady Alicia Leycester's fashionable son almost unlimited credit, less backward (now that the young officer seemed near the end of his tether), than were the money-lenders, in pressing their claims for payment.

It is scarcely surprising that the Colonel, who was well aware that Guy Leycester's embarrassments must have exceeded by a hundredfold those of all

the regimental youngsters put together, should—when his wife mentioned Captain Leycester's name as that of one not undeserving of rebuke—have both looked and felt uncomfortable. His reply betrayed to Florence—who was well acquainted with her husband's weaknesses—that the subject of Guy's well-known impecuniosity was one which had better, in her Colonel's presence, be avoided.

"Leycester," he said, "is the kind of man who, besides being a first-rate soldier, any regiment would regret to lose. If he should go a cropper, as the boys say, it would bring a certain amount of discredit on the Corps, and I for one sincerely hope, if it were only for Lady Alicia and the Admiral's sake, that he will be able to keep his head above water."

In that hope Lady Gregorie perfectly coincided. She, however, prudently forbore to impart to Sir Wilfred her cordial agreement with his wishes. Guy Leycester had earned for himself, amongst quiet-going husbands, a reputation which had naturally the effect of preventing prudent young wives from speaking out boldly in his praise; and Florence Gregorie differed in nothing from the immense majority of her sex, who both liked and admired this enfant gâté des dames. His manner to all women, from the highest to the lowest, was marked with the thoroughbred courtesy which disclosed the innate chivalry of his nature; and then he was so handsome, and carried his six-feet-two of manly height with an air so distinguished and graceful, that the unstudied attitudes, and even walk, of much-admired Guy Leycester, were by many an aspiring subaltern, frequently, but wholly without success, made matter for imitation. He was not at any time, a man of many words; neither had much care and money been in his boyhood and youth expended on his education; but his knowledge of the world was considerable, whilst a natural tact, and the companionship outside the barrack gates of good society conversationalists, had bestowed on him the gift of small talk, and that "touch-and-go" fashion of handling social matters which in the world so often does duty for "agreeableness." As regarded the women with whom, in their various grades, he had, or been supposed to have had, relations, the reticence of Guy Leycester was so

strict, and, I may add, so singular, that, but for his prestige and popularity, he would undoubtedly have incurred amongst his juniors a certain amount of ridicule—ridicule sub rosa, be it understood, for Guy was not one with whom even men of his own age permitted themselves to be unduly and obnoxiously familiar. Excepting in the one admirable proclivity, of his chivalrous respect for the weaker sex, a worse example for young officers could not well, in any regiment in the Service be found. None were ignorant of the patent facts of his immorality, his want of principle, and the verge of ruin on which, through his own misdoings, Captain Guy Leycester stood, and yet he was, by the commanding officer of his battalion, caressed and made much of; whilst even the rank

and file, carried away by the charm of his manner, and the innate generosity of the spendthrift's nature, followed the example of their officers, and would have gone through fire and water to do him service, and to prove their confidence in him as a first-rate soldier, and as the "soldiers' friend."





CHAPTER III.

A DARK HORSE.

between the Colonel and his wife which was recorded in the last chapter, the junior Major of the Chalkshire Rifles was compelled, through the pressure of long-continued ill-health, to leave the Service. From some cause, into which it is needless to enter, promotion did not go in the regiment, an exchange from another corps being effected by one Major Brereton, who was without delay gazetted to fill the place

of the invalided veteran. The remplacant of the grey-headed and much-respected old field-officer had spent the greater portion of his military career in India. His experience had been chiefly gained in out quarters, but he had seen some service, and had earned in a slight degree, a reputation as a soldier. When the name of Major Louis Brereton was first mentioned in the mess-room of the Rifles, as that of the man whom the young soldiers were to welcome as one of their fieldofficers, the antecedents as well as character of the latter became, not unnaturally, the subject of much conjectural talk.

"He's evidently what you may call a dark horse," remarked a would-be facetious lieutenant, Cardew by name; "and men who have been a long time in India are always nuisances." "Fancy," remarked young Durant, who was lounging lazily in a rocking-chair, his shell-jacket open, for the day was warm, and with an unpaid-for shilling cigar between his beardless lips, "the cheek of a fellow exchanging from a red regiment into ours!"

The lad's days in the crack Rifle regiment were, as he well knew, all but numbered, but this small display of esprit de corps sounded well, and cost him no trouble.

The surgeon of the battalion—a quiet man, and prosy, but withal somewhat addicted to gossip—now put in his word. Laying down the "Army and Navy Gazette," over the pages of which he had been poring, he said slowly, and after the manner of one who is ransacking the storehouses of his memory,—

"I recollect that when I was in India, there was a story about a mad dog, in which a young fellow of the name of Brereton was mixed up. Three men were dining together, when a dog belonging to one of them went mad, and tried to bite. The one of the three who was nearest the door was Brereton (it needn't, you know, have been this man, besides, the thing happened a long time ago), and he thinking, I suppose, that self-preservation was the first law of nature, rushed from the room, closing and locking the door behind him."

"What a coward!" "What an infernal cad!" were amongst the expletives which, after listening to this brief anecdote, were heard in varied tones from the much disgusted audience.

"And what became of the other

men?" asked more than one sympathiser with the victims of a brutal act of selfishness.

"Oh, as well as I can remember," replied Dr Braintree, "one of them killed the brute with his sword, but not before the other had been bitten, and he, poor fellow, died of rabies."

"I hope to G-," exclaimed one of the youngsters present, "that the man who is taking old Nugent's place is not the Brereton of whom you heard in India. One couldn't stand a man in our regiment who has such a story as that attached to his name."

"Now I come to think of it," resumed the surgeon, who was a prudent man, and always preferred being on the safe side, "I rather think that the hero of this story was a civilian; and what

makes it the more likely is, that he told the ancedote himself, boasting of his own cleverness in taking care of his own person first, whereas his conduct in the matter would have got him kicked out of any decent regiment in the Service."

At that moment a senior Lieutenant, who had served on the Commander-in-Chief's staff in India, came sauntering into the room, and the story of the mad dog, as connected with one Brereton, was eagerly, and with sundry comments thereupon, repeated to him.

"Did you ever hear of it?" was the question which, in various forms, was asked him on all sides.

"No; and I wasn't likely to," responded the Honourable Richard de Silvertop, better known in the regi-

ment as Dicky Dollars. "The affair happened most likely up the country, and before I joined. I recollect the name in India, but that had something to do with a woman."

"I daresay—most affairs have," remarked the doctor sententiously; and then, flattering himself that he had made a telling, as well as an original hit, he took advantage of the same to effect what he considered a "good exit" from the room.

Shortly after this, an event occurred which caused no small amount of sensation, not only in the Chalkshire Regiment, but in the big town of Broadmere itself. The two impecunious sublieutenants, Messieurs Durant and Fuller, were reported one day as "missing without leave" from their respective quarters.

It had long been apparent to lookers-on that the departure from the regiment of these two hopeful youths would not be long delayed, but it had occurred to no one, from the Colonel downwards, to imagine that in either case their retirement would have been effected in other than a normal and legitimate fashion; and now, to the disgrace of themselves and their relations, they had gone away like thieves in the night, carrying away with them every article of marketable value of which they had contrived on "tick" to obtain possession.

The town of Broadmere, many of whose wealthiest shopkeepers had been victimised by the absconding officers, was unpleasantly startled when the news from the barracks spread through the streets. In addition to the losses which

the jewellers, tailors, gunsmiths, etc. etc., had sustained, their faith in the military generally was shaken, and they almost vowed within themselves that they would never more give "credit" to an officer.

The shame and anger felt by the Colonel, as well as by the regiment generally, at the manner in which the "skedaddling" had been carried out, was intense. It was a case (as even the young fellows who had not for a lengthened period paid for a single article they possessed, declared) of utter swindling, for the culprits had made a clean sweep of every valuable thing, including a brand new sixty-guinea dog-cart, in which they had driven off—no one as yet knew where.

But if great was the consternation of the trades-people and money-lenders when the moonlight flitting of the graceless young offenders became known, what can be said of the grief of the widowed mother of Alfred Durant, when she, with her sorrowing daughters, read in the newspaper a short paragraph containing an account—the reverse of merciful of her boy's and his companion's misconduct. She was scarcely likely, poor soul, to have been apprised in a more considerate and less painful manner of the heavy calamity which had befallen her family, for, living as she and her girls had — from motives of economy done for some time past, in a distant part of Cornwall, and possessing in her son's regiment neither friend, nor even acquaintance, there existed no one in the outer world, save that son himself, who would have been either able or willing to

impart to her the fearful news of his disgrace. Alfred's letters to his homeangels' visits, from their preciousness in his mother's eyes as he well knew them to be—had of late grown rarer and more rare. He had been so good when first he joined, this youngest born, for whom she had sacrificed so much, had written to her every week, describing, with the frankness of a schoolboy, before the mother's love within his heart had grown cold and scant, the small events, as well as the more important circumstances, by which his new life was characterised, that Mrs Durant had been rendered happy in the belief that her Alfred's "home affections" would never in his heart and memory be disjoined from the interest in his new vocation which it was only natural that he should take.

But in this belief she was fated to be disappointed. The time—and that only too soon-arrived, when many weeks together were allowed to elapse without any signs of his existence being given by the absent one. It was in vain that his sisters, seeing, although she uttered no words of complaint, the mother's cheek grow pale and thin, and signs of breaking health betraying themselves in her languid movements, wrote imploring him, by the love they had always borne their boy, to cheer his mother's failing spirits by a letter. The lad, ashamed and self-reproachful, made no sign, and thus it followed that it was only by mere chance that the truth, in all its startling nakedness, became known to the anxious watchers in their faraway Cornish home.

Worse, far worse than her direct anticipations, was the reality, as, in all its complicated horrors, it became fully apparent to the already much-tried mother. She had been prepared for debt, and had even, in the secret recesses of her own mind, been alive to the possibility that some "dreadful creature"—one of those harpies who make victims of unsuspecting youth, and drag them down into perdition—had seized, body and soul, upon her boy: but here was worse than this. And Mrs Durant, who was a soldier's widow, and whose father had died fighting bravely in far-away Afghanistan for England's glory, felt to the very quick the bitter disgrace which her boy's conduct had brought upon the name he bore. Then came the awful question-awful in that there was no

one to answer it—of where had he gone? Dread visions of the hiding-places to which the lad, in his despair, might betake himself, filled the mother's brain. She pictured to herself the horror of the disgrace which he must be enduring, and could, in the anguish of her own heart, have put to him the patriot poet's touching question,—

"Where will you bury your shame? Where, in what desolate place, Hide the lost wreck of a name Broken and stained by disgrace?

One night, and one only, did Mrs Durant spend in sleepless cogitation on the steps which, in order to find her boy, it behoved her to take, and then she informed her girls that she intended, on that very day, to start by an early train to Broadmere. The

poor young creatures, who had spent the silent hours in tears, and in vain conjectures as to what would happen next, protested vehemently against their mother's project.

"You cannot do it, mother!" cried Helen, the elder of the two, and the most decided in speech and character. "Think how little strength you have, and how that only yesterday you had to come out of church because you felt so faint and weak."

"Oh, that was because good Mr Everett's sermon was so long, and he said such terrible things; besides," continued the unhappy lady, "the shadow of this dreadful misfortune may have been hanging over me. I am better to-day, and, dear children, I cannot rest quiet without knowing something of our boy.

He may be—oh, I tremble to think of it all!—in even some worse trouble than we know of, and it is not for his own mother to desert him now."

"No, no! we feel that, dearest," pleaded the fair young spokeswoman; whilst dark-eyed Mary could only cling round her parent's waist, and sob out her sorrow on the frail shoulder which was so ill-fitted to bear another load of care. "But cannot I - who am young and strong-undertake, instead of you, this long and trying journey? Surely I am old enough at nineteen to travel alone, and see strangers, and make inquiries about poor Alf. Do let me go, mother. Tell me all I have to do, and I will obey your instructions to the letter."

But to this plan Mrs Durant would Vol. I.

not listen for a moment. There were reasons—some of which she could not even hint at to her girls-why one so young and ignorant of the world's wickedness as was Helen, could not, in this momentous crisis of a young lad's life, be employed as a parent's substitute. She, that pure-minded and virtuous mother, might-who could foretell events? — be forced by cruel circumstances to follow the prodigal to the haunts of vice, and do battle for his possession with the lost ones of her sex; and therefore it was that she must go forth alone, armed only with the weapons of maternal love, and the undying patience of which, in a parent's heart, there exists such an endless store.

The journey from Penzance to Broadmere is a long, and, to an invalid, a trying one, but the strong excitement under which the widow laboured, together with a certain amount, unknown to herself, of the blessed gift of hope, enabled her to bear up bravely under the burden which had been laid upon her. As might have been expected, and as her anxious daughters had foretold, the inexperienced traveller met in her progress with contretemps without end. Long and innumerable were the waitings at junctions, and many the mistakes into which an imperfect education in the mysteries of "Bradshaw" caused her to fall; in short, it too soon became patent to her bewildered mind, that had she taken the advice of Mr Everard, their village clergyman, and gone to the north via London, both time and money would have been eventually saved.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning after her departure from home, that Mrs Durant, after a weary night of all but ceaseless travel, found herself suddenly hustled from her Train, and removed, she scarcely knew how, or by whom (for her head was in a whirl, and her perceptions of time and distance hopelessly confused), into a carriage, which, to her dismay, proved to be a smoking one. This startling event occurred when she was only some ten miles from Broadmere, the Train to which she had been transferred being a junction one, and used chiefly for the convenience of the military, and the conveyance of mineral ore to and from the city of Broadmere. The widow, rightly judging from the strong smell of tobacco which pervaded the compartment, that she had

involuntarily intruded where individuals of her sex are the reverse of welcome, immediately, in her feeble, ladylike voice, commenced an apology for her mistake to the only other occupant of the carriage. He—a tall, distinguished-looking man-Guy Leycester, to wit-had on her entrance thrown his lately-lighted cigar from the window, and he now, in the courteous, almost caressing manner with which he was in the habit of addressing the softer sex, apologised in his turn for the inconvenience to which he feared that his fellow-passenger was being put.

"One feels positively ashamed," he said, "of having helped to produce an atmosphere in which no lady can breathe with comfort;" and then noticing her haggard looks, he added kindly, "I am

afraid you are suffering from the oppression. Shall I open this window a little wider for you?"

"Thank you; it is not that," she faltered; "but if you would kindly tell me how far we are from Broadmere, and—and—from the barracks."

"We shall be there in ten minutes," was the reply. "The barracks come first, and if—it is my regiment that is quartered there—I can be of any use to you—"

"Oh! you can, or, at least, perhaps you may be!" the poor mother, who, at sight of one of her son's late brother-officers, lost her small remains of self-control, ejaculated. "I have come to ask,—to find out, if I can, what has become of my unhappy son; for I am Alfred Durant's mother; and oh, he was once

honourable and good, and if—" but here tears, which she strove hard to suppress, choked her utterance, and her slight frame shook with the violence of her emotion.

Guy Leycester was greatly distressed by the sight of a grief so real and so irrepressible. He would have given much to console the sorrowing mother with intelligence, however slight, of her "young scamp's" whereabouts; but unhappily his ignorance in that respect was as great as her own, he could only therefore speak to her in the soothing tones best suited to her state of mind, and entreat her to compose herself.

"I have no doubt," he said, "that one or other of our young fellows will be able to give you some information about your son. In the meantime, I

advise you to let me take you to a clean little inn, which stands about a mile from the barracks, and there you had better stay till I send one of our fellows to you. I daresay it will be Elphinstone, the Adjutant. He is as good a chap as ever lived, and always took an interest in Durant. Ah, here we are! Now let us see after your traps," and then gathering together the very limited "plunder" which his fellowtraveller tearfully informed him constituted her individual possessions, he, with as much respect (to quote the widow's later words) as if she had been a duchess, offered her his arm, and bearing in his other hand her small black leather travelling-bag, escorted her from the Station to the Dragon Inn. The landlady, a neatly-dressed, kindly-faced

woman, emerged from her own precincts to meet the somewhat incongruous-looking pair, with one of whom at least, she could boast of being in some degree what might be called, slightly acquainted.

Captain Leycester, on being curtseyed to by stout Mrs Purlings, raised his hat with as much outward respect as he would have paid to Royalty had it chanced to appear before him in the flesh, and said, in his courteous fashion,—

"Would you kindly allow this lady, who is very tired after a long journey, the use of a sitting-room, and — there may probably be more apartments required—for a few hours? A friend — Captain Elphinstone, from the barracks—will possibly call before long; but in the meanwhile, I am sure that you will make the lady as comfortable as you can."

"Certainly, Captain, certainly," responded the hostess of the Dragon cheerfully. "There is the upstairs front parlour, with a fire ready laid for lighting; and if the lady will step this way— Mind your 'at, Captain. Our doorway's low for such tall army gentlemen as you."

"All right," laughed Guy, as he shook hands with his new acquaintance, and advised her, in the simple, matter-of-fact manner which was calculated to check any possible suspicion on the landlady's part of the traveller's identity, to have some breakfast, and lie down for an hour or two to rest.

Rest! Ah, word thrice blessed to the ear! When — the weary woman asked herself—would she know the quiet joy of it again? It is easy for lookers-

on at human trials and heart tortures to cry Peace! Peace! to the afflicted ones, but as long (and that will be for aye) as "the wicked are like the troubled sea, whose waters cast forth mire and dirt," so long will sinless mothers weep tears of blood over the "thankless children" who have brought upon their declining years, sorrows which are more hard to bear than even death itself. In its full bitterness did Mrs Durant, when at last the kindly, officious landlady left her to her own thoughts, realise the truth that for her there was "no peace." She had been fully alive to the sympathetic delicacy of feeling which had prompted Captain Leycester to abstain, in Mrs Purlings' hearing, from mentioning the name of Durant; but oh! the shame of reflecting-which in

the solitude of the little inn's best room she could not but do-that the honoured name of her dead husband was now so indelibly stained by disgrace that the honest mistress of that humble inn might, if she knew all, flout and sneer at her! And then, to her dismay, the unhappy woman suddenly recollected that on the lid of her one small box, the address, "Mrs Durant, passenger to Broadmere," had been in Mary's large legible hand inscribed. Poor girls! not as yet had they had time to realise the truth that "Alf's extravagance" had changed for them the whole course and current of their lives. The "little mother" who, before these troubles came, had been gay and light-hearted almost as themselves, would perforce henceforward go on her way with lowered head, and

a step which in its heaviness betrayed the fact that for her, the zest of life, and the sunshine thereof, were for ever passed away. But this truth was not, as I before said, as yet patent to the widow's daughters. There would be money difficulties, of course, and more parings away from the few comforts which Alf's frequent demands upon the family purse had left to them; later on, too, would necessarily come the hard - to - answer question, of what the prodigal was to do next? They—id est, that impoverished widow's household-had it not in their power to help him farther; no fatted calf had they to kill, nor rich robe toput upon his shoulders: they could only weep tender tears upon his neck, and tell him that from the bottom of their hearts he was forgiven!



CHAPTER IV.

GUY LEYCESTER TO THE RESCUE.

fore her almost untasted breakfast, was picturing to herself her small luggage box, covered with black American cloth, and betraying on its humble yet shining surface that it belonged to one who bore the same name as that of the "swindler" Durant, Mrs Purlings, taking note in the entrance-passage of the address, had already made up her mind that the lady in the well-worn black cashmere and scanty silk

mantle, who was occupying, pro tem., her, best front parlour, was no other than the parent of the missing sub-lieutenant. She—the hostess—was a kind-hearted woman, and had had more trouble with her own boys than she had ever told to the father of her gamins; but she had buried—as the saying in her class is that worthy paterfamilias now, and the sons, God bless 'em! had been good to her on the whole. So, reasoning from analogy, she decided that the poor lady upstairs might take comfort from the experiences of a mother who, like herself, had given birth to unruly prodigals. Acting on this amiable impulse, Mrs Purlings ascended the narrow, well-worn stairs, and, having knocked softly at her guest's door, she received a low-voiced permission to enter.

Now it had been this good woman's purpose to, in the most consoling fashion, but nevertheless without delay or circumlocution, touch upon the discovery she had made. It required, however, but one glance at the gentle face of the unmistakably impecunious lady, and a few words from her educated voice, to demonstrate to the well-intentioned visitor the inexpediency of entering, without due preparation, on the subject of which her limited intellect was for the moment charged. Under these circumstances, a simple inquiry after the traveller's health was, by the intruder, substituted; and, approaching nearer to the table on which the tea-service had been arranged, she said, in the melancholy tones which, in the worthy creature's opinion, were best adapted to the display of sympathy and compassion,—

"Why, dear heart'm, you've never touched your breakfast! It isn't to your liking, I am afraid; and yet the tea's about the best as can be got in Broadmere. Would a fresh egg tempt you now'm, do you think? or a slice, cut very thin, of some bileed edge bone of beef?"

"Nothing, thank you. Everything is very nice," replied Mrs Durant feebly. "I believe that I am too tired to eat. Rest and quiet are what I want the most."

"Ah! poor lady, I know well enough what you must be feeling," rejoined Mrs Purlings dolefully; "for when I've been in trouble myself, I've been that put about by people coming bothering with vol. I.

their accounts and their inquiries, that I haven't known which way to turn myself. But, as I used to say, there's no good comes of worretting; things right themselves in the end — leastways they did with me, and so they will with you'm, if you keep up a good heart. Why, my boy Joe was at one time about as troublesome a young customer as you'd ever come across, and now, thank God! he's as steady as the town clock, and has taken to the butchering line of business, as handy, for all the world, as if he had been bred to the trade from a babby."

Mrs Durant listened in absolute silence to the landlady's exordium. That she herself stood revealed to that loquacious personage, as well as to the entire household, as the mother of the abscond-

ing officer, she at once perceived, and the torture she endured at having her bleeding wounds thus roughly handled, is easier to imagine than to describe. In what manner she would have responded to this kindly-meant effort at consolation, cannot however now be known, as at that identical moment one of the employées of the establishment gave notice—holding, meanwhile, the door ajar in her hand—that a "hofficer" from the barracks was waiting below to see the lady who had come by the morning Train.

"Ask him to come up, please; and" (addressing the landlady), "thank you very much for coming to see me," said Mrs Durant hurriedly. She was one of those rarely unselfish beings to whom the feelings of others are things of moment,—things, in short, which even those

who are themselves in trouble are not justified in trampling upon and ignoring; and therefore it was that, whilst the clatter of spurs and sword upon the stairs set her heart beating wildly, she did not forget, though Mrs Purlings' words had sorely tried her, that the intention of her tormentor had been kind and Christian-like.

It is not necessary—seeing that the course of our story, and the amount of matter which it contains alike require us to "keep moving"—to minutely particularise the interview which, between Captain Rowley Elphinstone and the grieving mother of his former subaltern, took place. He was very gentle with her, breaking as tenderly as he could, the news that the two misguided boys—as to her, he charitably styled the culprits—were, instead of seeking with tears

a secluded place in which to repent them of their sins, "living like fighting cocks," or—to quote Captain Elphinstone's own words—"spending a short time at the Louvre Hotel in Paris."

No sooner did the poor mother realise this startling truth, than she announced her intention of starting off immediately to the Continent.

"I must bring him home at once, Captain Elphinstone," she said. "He cannot resist temptation. Poor unhappy boy! he is so weak—so easily led!—not really wicked," looking very wistfully into the kind face of her new friend; "you do not think that of him, I hope? And yet—if anyone has more reason than another to have an ill opinion of him, it is you, for I have not now to learn how good you have

always been to him, and how little he has profited by your advice."

"Poor fellow, he has been his own worst enemy," rejoined Rowley. "But as regards this journey to Paris, you must not think of it. Your own health-if it were nothing else-should put the idea out of the question."

"Oh!" she cried, "when it is a question of saving Alfred, there is no fear of my breaking down. I am stronger than I look, and when once I have him under my care again—"

"But the question is, my dear Mrs Durant," interrupted Elphinstone, and as he spoke the anxious woman noted the added seriousness of his voice and manner, "whether you can, with prudence and — and — safety bring your son to England."

"With safety?—I do not understand. Is he—can he be in any danger?" asked the now effectually frightened woman. "He is so young—only twenty! Oh! Captain Elphinstone, what reason have I —has he—badly as he has behaved—to fear?"

"I cannot tell you-I know so little of-of-these things," her interlocutor said compassionately; "but perhaps if you were to see a lawyer—"

"Oh, then there is something still worse to hear!" she, with growing agitation, ejaculated. "He-my boy-hasno-no-not forged!" (and as she uttered the fearful word, a strong shudder ran visibly through her frame). "His father's son can never have sunk into such depths of crime as that."

"You are right, dear madam, and I-

with the best intentions—have causelessly frightened you. Your son's fault is comparatively a venial one; nevertheless it unhappily, possibly places him within the power of the law. What he has done is this. Finding that the circumstance of his being still under age stood in the way of his obtaining money from a certain Jew diamond merchant, he, in an unguarded moment, and being goaded on by his necessities, took an oath that he had passed the age of twenty-one. The money-lender was probably well aware of the deception, but what cared he? He had got the poor boy into his toils, and—"

He, the good-natured apologist for the errors of the widow's son, would probably, in his anger against the class under discussion, have added a few more sentences

to his diatribe, but a slight, rustling sound caused him to look up from the table on which his eyes had been unconsciously fixed, and he perceived, to his surprise and consternation, that Mrs Durant had quietly fallen back, in a dead faint, upon the shining horse-hair sofa. An energetic pull at the bell-rope was almost immediately followed by the hurried entrance of the landlady, and under her direction, measures for the recovery of the sufferer were, without a moment's delay, undertaken. Addressing herself to the chambermaid, who, together with sundry other members of the establishment, were showing their faces in the doorway, Mrs Purlings, in tones of suppressed energy, exclaimed,—

"Run, Lizzie, for some brandy. Here, take the key of my cupboard; and

bring the vinegar cruet along with you. Poor dear lady," this to Elphinstone, who had been employed in tenderly placing the unconscious head upon the slippery pillow of the couch, "I guessed how it would be when she wouldn't take anything to her breakfast; she wouldn't let on, poor soul, not a word, about her troubles, for all I left everything at sixes and sevens downstairs to try and cheer her up a bit."

"You had far better have let her alone," retorted Captain Rowley savagely; "and, Mrs Purlings, I must beg of you," he went on, with some severity, as he drew on his gloves, "not—when this lady recovers—to say anything,—to ask her any questions, I mean, about her private concerns. Dr Braintree, our surgeon, will, I hope, be here in a few minutes,

and he will, I am sure, insist upon the same thing, namely, perfect rest, and freedom from intrusion."

Mrs Purlings, feeling considerably aggrieved, had, during the delivery of this speech, been busying herself, not, however, as yet with any perceptible result, in the restoration to consciousness of the patient. Mrs Durant had, it is true, opened her eyes, but only for a moment; with a slight quiver of the lids, they had closed again, and she now lay as still, and almost as breathless, as a corpse. The failure of her simple remedies was beginning to have a crushing effect upon Mrs Purlings' spirits, and it was with feelings of intense relief that she hailed the entrance of the regimental doctor.

"We can't bring her too no how, doctor," she was beginning; but Dr Braintree

cut short her flood of words by taking the management of the case into his own hands.

He had seen much practice, that middle-aged medico, who had now under his care not only an ailing body but a mind diseased, and he proved himself equal to the occasion. That his patient was none other than the mother of the erring absentee was now an open secret; and, moreover, Captain Elphinstone had related to the surgeon the particulars of his interview with Mrs Durant.

"She evidently feels the disgrace acutely," the Adjutant wound up by saying; "and I would have given much to avoid telling her the worst, but there was no alternative. She was bent on going to Paris, and bringing the young scapegrace home, and that, as you are

aware, might have ended rather awkwardly. I hope, doctor, that you will find there is nothing serious the matter, for the poor thing is quite by herself here, and the Dragon Inn is not precisely a pleasant locality for a lady under an attack of illness to remain in."

Pleasant, however, or otherwise as the Dragon might be, it soon became apparent to Dr Braintree's experienced eyes that, even without taking a too desponding view of the case, a considerable time must perforce elapse before Mrs Durant would be enabled to leave her present uncongenial quarters. There were, in the surgeon's opinion, certain diagnostics in his patient's case which clearly pointed to the eventuality of brain, or at least of nervous, fever supervening on the attack of syncope; and if this fear should un-

happily be realised, what more unsuitable place in which to be laid up than a third-rate inn—let that inn be ever so clean, and even comfortable, in its waycould there be found? As for the sufferer herself, she, on recovering from her prolonged attack of faintness, appeared, happily perhaps for herself, altogether unconscious either of where she was, or of the events which had lately taken place. Her eyes had assumed a fixed and bewildered look, whilst the power of speech seemed temporarily to have deserted her. From time to time she made what were evidently painful efforts to speak distinctly, but the few words she was able to articulate, fell, in what may be called nonsense sentences from her trembling lips, and comprehending apparently that so it was, the helpless creature, with a

mournful shake of her drooping head, would desist from further efforts to make herself understood.

To the little inn's best bedroom the poor mother had been carried by tender hands, and there, on a big old-fashioned four - poster, which filled up two - thirds of the small apartment, she lay with widely-opened eyes, and with the fire of incipient fever burning in her veins. condition, both of mind and body, occasioned much sympathy amongst the kindhearted soldiers who were cognisant of her illness and of its cause; and many and anxious were the inquiries that were daily made concerning her state. Amongst the most constant of the visitors to the little inn was the Colonel's wife. Gregorie "knew," as the saying is, through the medium of mutual friends, of Mrs

Durant and her family; but such incidental and vicarious acquaintance was not needed in order to induce Sir Wilfred's kind-hearted wife to befriend, as far as lay in her power, the forlorn stranger who lay-it might be, near her endalmost within the barrack gates. It was by Florence Gregorie that the suggestion of writing to Mrs Durant's "people" was first mooted; but it was Rowley Elphinstone who, in his capacity of quondam friend and mentor of the absent lad, took upon himself the task of writing such a letter to Miss Durant as would prepare her for the chances of still worse intelligence on the morrow. He made no attempt to disguise his opinion that Mrs Durant ought to have, at this juncture, a near relation by her side. "We are doing for her what little

we can," the Adjutant wrote, "but, being comparative strangers, we are, I may almost say, working in the dark."

"That will fetch the young lady," said Rowley to himself, as he fixed a stamp on the letter, and pressed it down securely with his doubled fist. "From what the mother said, I take her to be a good sort. Wanted to come and look up Master Alf herself, poor girl! Well, I for one shall be deuced glad when the young woman turns up," he, still soliloquising in a dreamy fashion, added, when his lucubrations were cut short by the entrance of a visitor.

"Hallo! old chap," he, addressing the unexpected intruder, exclaimed. "Why you are a second Sir Boyle Roche's bird, in two places at once. I heard that you were off for one of your runs up you. I.

to town to-day, and now, here you are."

"Yes, here I am, as you say," rejoined Guy Leycester, as he carelessly threw his length of limb into a comfortable barrack lounging-chair, "and here—not exactly in this room, so cheer up again, old fellow—I mean to remain, till such time as you and I shall have hit upon some plan for getting that poor woman out of the Dragon's jaws."

Elphinstone had left his writing-chair, and was standing on that meet spot for an English gentleman's meditations, namely, the rug before an empty firegrate. With something akin to triumph in that he too had been occupying himself in the widow's concerns, he pointed to the letter, stamped, and bearing the

address, in his big, masculine handwriting, of Miss Helen Durant.

"I hope," he said, "that we shall soon have better advice as to how to act. I have had a talk with Lady Gregorie, and, partly at her suggestion, I have written to Miss Durant."

"Who will, I conclude, come to her mother without delay; but in the meanwhile, as old Braintree says, every hour that Mrs Durant spends in that beastly hole is driving another nail into her coffin."

"Oh, come! The poor old Dragon is not so bad as that comes to. Lady Gregorie went yesterday to see Mrs Durant, and was quite struck with the cleanliness and niceness of her bedroom."

"I wonder if the fair Florence were to visit the place in the evening, whether she would be equally enchanted with the odour of stale bird's-eye, and the row and rattle of the billiard balls. Mrs Purlings does her best, good old soul, to keep the house quiet, but she has her customers to consider, and one can't expect her to quarrel with Hodge and Tommy Atkins for the sake of a poor lady who is probably about to do her the ill service of dying in her house."

"But what is the alternative? What, in your opinion, can be done?" Elphinstone, a trifle impatiently, asks.

"Well, it strikes me that Braintree's advice must be followed, and that Mrs Durant must be moved as soon as possible into a private house."

"Yes, but what house? A Broadmere lodging would be almost worse, I expect, even than the Dragon—"

"Ah, but I'm not thinking of that

abominable thing—a lodging! It's the Shanty we want to have the sick woman taken to—"

"The Shanty! Mrs Denham's house! You surely cannot mean it!"

"Indeed I do; and pray—may I ask—why not?"

"Why? Upon my word now— Well, if you come to ask me—"

"I do ask you, and, what is more," he, with one of the smiles, half cynical and half caressing, which were characteristic of his weak, but handsome mouth, added, "I expect to have an answer."

"Well, for one thing," the Adjutant, finding himself fairly driven into a corner, said, "the Shanty is such a little place—"

"Granted; just big enough for two, and no more; but as Denham and his wife have gone for six weeks to the Riviera, and as I've telegraphed to him to lend me the Shanty whilst they are away, it has been arranged between Braintree and me—at least not exactly arranged, till we had talked it over with you—that he should see to the migration of Mrs Durant at once. They have left two servants in the house—one a dear old woman who was Mrs Denham's nurse—so that will be all right; and if the daughter comes, which I conclude she will do, it will be at any rate better for her than putting up at a pothouse."

After this explanation, what farther objection could Captain Ephinstone even venture to hint at against a plan which in some respects was very decidedly recommendable? He was on more intimate terms with Guy Leycester than was any other officer in the regiment, yet even

he could not bring himself to disclose to his friend the real reason for his objection to that friend's proposal. The truth was, that if only Mrs Durant had been in question, if there had been no young lady, by name "Helen," to whom he had just been taking upon himself to write a letter of advice, Rowley Elphinstone would probably not have been stirred by a certain dim sense of the indecorum involved therein, to object to Guy's plan of proceeding. But there did, as he well knew, exist a Helen—a girl whom he pictured to himself as pure and unstained as snow, who might in a very few hours be on her way to Broadmere; and—strive as he might against the feeling—he could not, without a sensation of repugnance, picture to himself that girl as an inmate of Mrs Denham's house.



CHAPTER V.

AN AFFAIR OF "ANCIENT HISTORY."

ton was gazetted as Major of the Chalkshire Rifles, was certainly—by one person at least who had an interest in the Corps—not looked upon with favourable eyes. Lady Gregorie—now a woman of some seven-and-twenty years—had, in her early and romantic girlhood, been so unfortunate as to make acquaintance with the man whose very name—seeing that a decade had slipped by since she had heard it—had almost

escaped her memory. It was in the first-class compartment of a Belgian express Train that Florence Maynard, travelling after her school holidays, with an elderly and confidential English maid, back to her *Pension* at Bruges, met, and was politely accosted by a good-looking and gentlemanlike-mannered young Englishman. That Englishman was no other than Louis Brereton. Florence, with her fresh young beauty, and her bright untutored talk, at once attracted his admiration. Throughout a journey of several successive hours, during the greater part of which the duenna slept the sleep of the just, Mr Brereton, then a lieutenant in a Line Regiment, and travelling to Bruxelles, on leave to visit his parents, did not permit his attentions to his pretty fellow-traveller to flag. And

Florence? Well, as is the wont of her sex and age, she was pleased with being made much of, and as much bewildered as enchanted by the first compliments to her beauty which in her young and secluded life had as yet saluted her ears. The story—totally innocent of harm as regarded its child heroine, as it doubtless was-of her adventure with Louis Brereton, was, however, destined to bring forth evil fruit. The man, being vicious to the core, and the object of his convoitise being only a simple, unsuspicious girl, the consequences of this chance meeting may be easily guessed. Brereton found no difficulty in discovering the locality of the English maiden's temporary home. Bruges is, as all the world knows, a dull and ancient city, but it is easy of access from the gay little Belgian capital, and

not a few were the trips taken by the enterprising British officer from the Boulevard de Waterloo to the banks of the dismal-looking canal over which looked the prison-like windows of the Pension de St Agathe. On the low wall that skirted the canal, Mr Brereton would, for hours at a time, seat himself, thereby—as he fondly hoped—not only working on the young lady's feelings, but succeeding in "compromising" the pupil (who-as he had taken the trouble to ascertainwas to a certain extent an heiress), and thus compelling her parents to receive him as a suitor for her hand. These manœuvres—silly and in bad taste although they were-would not of themselves have been productive of much injury to the carefully-guarded pupil, had it not been that Brereton was clever

enough to induce the inexperienced girl to commit herself by writing to him. They were but two in number, those foolish little notes in which she assured her well-loved Louis of her undying devotion, but, short and simple in their childish ignorance as they were, those eagerly entreated for billet doux were destined to work the writer much trouble in the days which were to come.

The following letter, written by Lady Gregorie immediately after she had become aware that Louis Brereton was about again to play a part (an odious one, possibly), in her present prosperous life, will afford ample proof of the condition of mind into which the writer of the letters had been—without preparation—thrown. It was addressed to one Emily Vidal, a former schoolfellow of

Lady Gregorie's, and her confidante in the silly open-air flirtation which ten years previously had been carried on between the military heiress hunter and his intended victim. Miss Vidal was two years older than her friend, and in experience of the world, and knowledge of mankind, had been-when the pair first became acquainted—ten years in advance of Florence. It was this superiority in worldly knowledge which threw pretty, simple-minded "Flo" into the arms, as it were, of her far less personally attractive, but very astute, fellow-pupil. Emily Vidal—the daughter of a decayed gentleman (if gentleman indeed he ever had been) was quick, on Florence Maynard's first appearance at the Pension, to perceive the "advantage" which from a friendship with the well-born and well-

endowed new pensionnaire, might be "sucked." She was an adroit flatterer. not being—to borrow a culinary phrase too "heavy a hand" with the condiments, but administering them in homeopathic doses, and with a discretion that was worthy of an older head. Florence as might have been expected—fell at once under the spell. It was pleasant to be worshipped, and seeing that the possession of a sweetheart is—when the secret of that possession is confined to a girl's own breast -of comparatively small value—she lost no time in opening out her pure young heart for the inspection and vivisection of her clearer-sighted, and sympathising friend.

Of late years—that is to say, since her marriage, which had taken place four years previously, Lady Gregorie had seen—not from choice but from necessity,

comparatively little of Emily Vidal. fortunes of the latter had, during that period, undergone a change for the worse. Heavy turf and sundry horse-breeding losses, together with an expenditure far beyond his means, had reduced Mr Vidal, père, to the condition of an impecunious man, and his four still unmarried daughters, of whom Emily was the youngest, were left, with a gouty father and an habitually querulous mother, to "dree their weird" somewhere in the direction of that comparatively cheap and populous district known in the Directory as Maida Vale. To this young woman—one who, as I need hardly say, did not bear the reverses of fortune with the contented mind which, according to Holy Writ, is a continual feast-Lady Gregorie wrote as follows:—

"My DEAREST EM, -I fear you may have thought me unkind in not having sooner answered your last letter, but the delay has not, I assure you, been owing to forgetfulness. I have been wanting to name a time for your promised visit, but for various reasons have found doing so difficult. I am not, of course, quite my own mistress, and although Wilfred, I am happy to say, continues to be kindness itself, yet even the best of men are "kittle cattle," and I really think they sometimes positively enjoy putting spokes in one's wheels. Just now, however, I am happy to say, there are no spokes, and I am at full liberty to write that Tuesday in next week will suit us beautifully to receive you. You must come prepared for a little—I wish for your sake it were more —dissipation. We—the Chalkshires—

give a ball on the twentieth, and the Town, another—where we may expect to have great fun—on the Tuesday following. You will find poor Molyneux shyer than ever, but he will be a different man before you have been here a week. And, by the way, who do you think has turned up again? Why that wretch Louis Brereton! He has dropped into the vacant Regimental 'majority,' and I could almost wish—only it would be too wicked that it was the grand general majority instead, that he had joined. I am terribly afraid that he means mischief, and, if so, you who are so much more clever than I am in such matters, must help me to circumvent him. As you know, I had never heard a syllable either of or from the man since, until a short time before my marriage, he wrote those odious hints VOL. I. G

about the letters. You advised me then to take no notice of his impertinence, and I am sure that you were right; and oh! I was so in hopes that he had forgotten me altogether. But how can one ever be sure? During five years I heard nothing of him, and then one day, when I least expected it, I was startled almost to death by the sight of his handwriting! I can never tell you how I dread the prospect of seeing him; and Wilfred too, who is so quick to notice everything that passes! It is enough to drive one wild. Still, I may be disquieting myself in vain. Miracles may sometimes happen, and there exists the possibility that this miserable cad—for so he certainly did deserve to be called—may have become metamorphosed into a gentleman. Come without fail, dear, and tell me whether or

not you think the nature of the man is unchanged, and ever believe me affectionately yours,

FLORENCE GREGORIE."

The young person to whom this urgent appeal for aid is addressed, had, when the letter is put into her hands, just been thinking - without, it must be owned, very kindly feelings-of the writer thereof. She-Emily-is seated with two of her elder sisters in the small back drawing-room of the shabby Portsdown Road house in which the retired stockbroker has found a shelter. The three "girls" the youngest of whom is within a year of her thirtieth birthday—are busily engaged in altering, planning, and contriving sundry well-worn evening dresses into an appearance calculated to deceive the general public into the belief that the

said dresses have only just left the milliner's hands.

The eldest of the three is plain, but clever, a good mimic, and an excellent hand at making herself generally agreeable; whilst the second—a faded beauty, has adopted the pensive style of attractiveness, which style, seeing that her conversational powers are limited, suits her, as the saying is, "down to the ground." With the exception of a little occasional jealousy in regard to Emily, whose intimacy with Lady Gregorie they have never been permitted to share, the sisters live together in harmony. The mention, however, of the Chalkshire Rifles, and of "Em's" highly-placed friend, rarely fails to kindle a certain spark which is the reverse of sisterly love in the breasts of the older spinsters, and thus it follows,

that when Miss Emily, in a would-be careless fashion, announces the fact that her letter is from Lady Gregorie, and that it contains an invitation to Royalty Square for the following week, Miss Vidal finds no difficulty in supplementing the communication with a few bitter and well-chosen words.

"It is so very long since you have heard from Lady Gregorie," she, looking up from her *frilling*, says, "that I hardly imagine you will even think of going to Broadmere."

"I shall not only think of going, but go," Em, with a considerable display of spirit, rejoins; "and, what is more, I shall coax Mrs Marshall into letting me have two dresses on tick."

"On tick!" breaks in the beauty.
"What an expression! Really, Em, when

you even talk about going amongst soldiers, slang comes so naturally to you that one feels positively shocked."

"Does one? I think it rather nice," retorts her junior, "and I call Flo no end of a brick for asking me. There are two balls—"

"And you've neglected Mrs Allen's 'Restorer' frightfully, lately. I saw two grey hairs at the top of your head no later than this morning."

This cruel shaft is levelled by the clever sister, and proves effectual in driving her antagonist, almost in tears, from the room. But ah! if those (for the nonce) unkind relations could have seen into the envied one's heart, they would have found there, small cause for jealous grudgings; for Emily Vidal is quite sharp enough to understand that she owes her

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present invitation to Broadmere solely to the fact that the gazetting of Louis Brereton to the Rifles has terribly alarmed her friend.

"What a fool she must think me!" the matured candidate for matrimony says to herself. "Ou peut être plus fine que les autres, mais pas plus fine que toutes les autres, and I for one can see very clearly through Milady Flo's little game. She thinks I may know of some dodge by which those idiotic letters may be got out of Brereton, and she expects to blind me to her only real motive, by writing of balls and parties! That Sir Wilfred does not like me she knows as well as I do, and yet, there again, she flatters herself that she throws dust into my eyes! However, we shall see what we shall see, and in the meanwhile I must lose no time in trying to talk over Mrs Marshall about my dresses."

Before the arrival of Miss Vidal in Royalty Square, three events of some Garrison importance had taken place. Major Brereton had made his somewhat tardy appearance on the scene; Mrs Durant had, under careful military and medical supervision, been safely removed to the Shanty; and her daughter Helen had been met at the little Junction Station by Rowley Elphinstone, and duly escorted by that chivalrous soldier to her mother's present abode. There was at first sight nothing in the appearance of the pale, agitated girl whose powers of speech seemed to have temporarily deserted her, to enhance the interest which the Regiment generally, and Rowley El-

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phinstone in especial, were so obviously taking in the misfortunes of the Durant family. Helen, in her plain black dress, and with a veil shrouding her white and trembling lips from the gaze of the curious, was remarkable for nothing save her rather unusual height, and the gracefulness of her walk and carriage. In response to Captain Elphinstone's whispered information that Mrs Durant was rather better than worse, she could only bow her head in silence; and then, taking his offered arm, she was led by him to the carriage that was in readiness to receive her.





CHAPTER VI.

A REPENTANT PRODIGAL.

" T last! And I feel assured that
your patient must be really
better, or I should not now

have the long-hoped-for pleasure of seeing you."

It is Rowley Elphinstone who speaks. His tones are low and gentle, and he holds, during the half minute which suffices for their utterance, the two small hands of Helen Durant between his own. He has not seen her since the day—now nearly a week ago—when he escorted the

agitated girl, in a Station fly, to Mrs Denham's small, yet luxurious, pied à terre; but Helen has not now to learn how zealously both he and others of her new friends had been employed in her sick mother's service, and her heart is brimming over with gratitude towards the kindly visitor, to whom she is now able to express, for the first time, her gratitude in spoken words.

Looking up with bright yet tearful eyes into the soldier's face, she says,—

"Yes, thanks to God, and to all here who have been so good to us! the worst, Dr Braintree assures us, is over, and my dear mother will be, we hope, quite herself again. But I tremble when I think of Alfred's coming, and of what the effect on her may be. He—the doctor—advised my telling her that he was sent for, and that

someone had gone to bring him back, but oh, Captain Elphinstone, supposing that he should not come! He must feel so ashamed, so conscious-stricken."

"Yes: but he must remember that the mother who longed to see him was at the point of death, and that she had ever been to him— Well, what only a mother can be. No, you need not fear that your brother will prove refractory. He is good at heart, I think, and, besides, the friend who has volunteered to bring him back, is one to whom it would not be easy for him to say 'No.'"

"Then who is it that has gone?" Helen, feeling not a little surprised at this piece of information, asks? thought it was a-a confidential servant, perhaps, and I longed to say how kind I thought the friend who had sent him to Paris, had been; and now you tell me—"

"That the emissary in question who, by the way" (Elphinstone, with a smile, broke in), "is simply his own emissary—is no other than a certain erratic Captain of ours, by name Guy Leycester, who having for the moment no job on hand, set off post haste to Paris, in order to bring back your brother."

Helen Durant, on hearing the name of Leycester, clasps her small white hands together in positive dismay.

"Oh, Captain Elphinstone!" she exclaims, "what shall we do? How can we ever hope to repay such kindness? It is owing to Captain Leycester that we are here, in these delightful rooms; not but what the beauty of them troubles me greatly: it would be so dreadful if

anything were to be broken. But, of course, leaving the 'Dragon' was a great blessing. Dr Braintree says that mother never would have recovered there, so that, under Providence, we owe her life to him. But—but—oh! there is more yet to speak of. There is," she continues. flushing hotly as the word escapes her lips, "the money that all this has cost. Where has it come from? I had only just enough for my journey here, and that was lent me by our clergyman, Mr Everard, with whom my sister Mary is staying whilst we are away; and mother will, I know, fret dreadfully until she can sell out Trust money, in order to pay all the debts which Alfred's misconduct has entailed upon us."

There is in her young face an expression of such deep despondency, that Elphinstone—moved with compassion for her poverty and helplessness—can no longer resist the impulse to throw himself on the couch beside her, and entreat her to consider him henceforth as a friend for life.

"Do not talk of fretting," he says soothingly. "Yours was a case of what I may almost call a brother soldier's trouble; and we were all glad to do our part in helping. Thank God! there is plenty of what the Germans call kameradschaft, in the Rifle Corps; and the debts of a fellow who has worn the green uniform shall never—as long as we can help it—be brought up in judgment against him."

The conflicting feelings of shame and gratitude which are warring in Helen's breast absolutely forbid for the moment any attempt on her part to enter into the question of her obligations. She can only press in silence the hand which Rowley still holds imprisoned, and then, after murmuring indistinctly something about being wanted in her mother's room, she leaves her soldier friend, to think over what has passed.

Helen Durant—worn although she was with anxiety and sleeplessness — had, during that short half-hour's colloquy, struck Rowley Elphinstone as being rarely lovely, and it was with some amount of trepidation that he remembered how large a proportion of the girl's gratitude was due to his friend. Helen was not one—as he could plainly see—by whom such an obligation was at all likely to be repudiated; and Elphinstone, who perhaps set an undue value—as compared to his own—

on Guy's attractions, had already begun to fear the effect which the latter's chivalrous conduct might produce upon Miss Durant. It was true that Guy was not in a position—even should his tastes incline that way—to marry, and, moreover—on principle, as he himself said—he never —if he could help it—either talked to, or danced with, "girls"; but, notwithstanding these re-assuring facts, Elphinstone could not bring himself to feel satisfied with the aspect of affairs. Helen was, in his opinion, so especially charming, and if she should look up with those pathetic eyes of hers into Guy's handsome face, and thank him in her gentle voice for all his kindly help, how could he-so Elphinstone, with incipient envy of his friend's advantages, asked himself -choose but love her?

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The friendly but troublesome office of endeavouring to restore young Durant to the safe custody of his mother, devolved upon Guy in this wise. A fellow feeling rendered the latter acutely sympathetic as regarded the state of mind in which the truant at the present moment probably found himself. He entertained more than one vivid recollection of scenes with the Admiral, when he—the prodigal son—had been—to borrow his own expression—blown up sky high for the venial (?) sin of ordering jewellery, etc., for which he could not afford to pay; and he could well understand that, under the circumstances, the defaulter would very decidedly "funk" the meeting with his people which was in the present instance, deemed advisable. "I call it a deuced hard case," Captain Guy would sometimes, in his languid way, remark, "that I never can have a sixpence of my own, without some officious fellow writing to say it's his." Now, seeing that Admiral Leycester was one of the most scrupulously honourable of men, and that he considered the non-payment of a tradesman's bill in precisely the same light as the shuffling off of a debt—so-called—of honour, the frequent money disagreements between father and son need to the reader be the cause of no surprise whatever.

On the occasion when the two Captains who were chiefly interested in Mrs Durant's troubles had met together to consult as to the best means to be adopted for the withdrawal from Paris of the widow's son, Guy Leycester had given voice to the following somewhat remarkable opinion:—

"Look here, old man," he said impressively. "A fellow who, when he is telegraphed to, that his mother is dying and has asked for him, makes no sign, is not to be talked into doing the right thing, by even so respectable an old duffer as your man Cumberbatch. Now if I go—'

"You go! Good Lord!" And at the bare idea of this modern instance of "the blind leading the blind," Rowleyafter giving vent in four impressive words to his amazement—fell back, with an explosion of laughter, into his chair.

"Well. And why shouldn't I do as well, or better than anyone else? Cumberbatch would only prose at the youngster, and you wouldn't do much better; whereas I shall stand no nonsense. I, shall just take him by the scruff of the neck, and say, 'Come along, old chap.

You've had your fling, and now you must take the consequences;' and I'll answer for it that he'll follow me."

"Like a dog, eh?"

"No, like a sheep to the slaughter, or a whipped cur, or any other miserable and degraded thing. I pity him from my soul, poor devil! but—having compassion also on myself-I must repeat, what indeed I have said before, that when a chap is up a tree, it is a jolly lounge for him not to be handicapped with a father. But now about the money. It won't come to much, but I must ask you to lend me enough to clear the young fellow out of Paris, and bring us both safe back. I won't spend a farthing more than I can help out there, but I literally have not got a rap."

"Your normal condition, dear old

chap." Elphinstone, laying his hand kindly on his brother officer's shoulder, said. He had risen from his chair, and was about to seat himself at his writingtable, when he turned round, and, with a slightly suggestive smile, added,—"But how about Paris?—Paris which you know as well, or better than you do your London, and where—"

"I shall turn neither to the right hand nor to the left. The image of that poor delirious mother will be ever before me, and till such time as I can bring this young reprobate to her side, I shall know neither peace nor rest."

It was always a matter of some difficulty to decide whether, when Guy Leycester happened to be in a rather grandiloquent mood, he spoke in jest or earnest. Elphinstone, however, was sufficiently acquainted with his friend's inner nature to be certain that in the present instance he was thoroughly to be trusted. Guy was, in truth, kind-hearted to the verge of weakness. The impulse to give was as strong within him as the craze for gambling, and the passion (as the old Admiral had once described it) of appropriating to himself possessions which rightfully belonged to others. Strange, perhaps, to say, all young and innocent things turned with affection and confidence to Guy. Bashful children raised their heads, and smiled responsive to his pleasant greeting; while as for dogs, there was not, from the pet fox-terrier with his jingling bells, to the big St Bernard, merciful in his strength and greatness, that was not, on a first introduction, ready to hail Guy Leycester as a friend.

He experienced little difficulty in finding the widow's graceless son, towards whom he felt anything but mercifully inclined. Some little time indeed elapsed before he gave the now thoroughly ashamedof-himself lad, the relief of hearing that the worst item in his heavy list of transgressions would—thanks to Captain Elphinstone's exertions—never now be brought up in judgment against him. As he (Guy) had expected would be the case, the crestfallen young fellow made no effort at resistance; an amount of pusillanimity for which his bear-leader heartily despised him. Leycester's nature was essentially combative, and it was chiefly owing to Alfred's display of débile submission that the older man could not bring himself to enter into conversation with his evidently miserable charge. The

"fellow feeling" (or, I should rather say, the similarity of some of his tastes with those of the delinquent) which should have rendered him "wondrous kind," was neutralised, if not indeed extinguished, by the fact that the sins of his junior having "found him out," that weak vessel was meekly reaping the fruits of his misconduct.

Then, too, it must be remembered that Guy's stock in hand of compassion had been already largely drawn upon: the object of that sympathy being the chief victim—as Guy considered Mrs Durant to be—of the culprit's transgressions. That gentle creature had been, both by Elphinstone and the doctor, spoken of to him as a patient sufferer brought to the brink of the grave by reason of this "young ruffian's" ingratitude, and selfish

sponging on his mother's slender resources; and Guy, albeit he did not go the length of thanking God that he was not "even as that sinner," could nevertheless, he flattered himself, hold his own in comparison with the widow's son, inasmuch as never since he had entered the army, had he applied to Lady Alicia for assistance in his needs. To be sure, the said Lady Alicia was not the kind of woman likely to make sacrifices for a son; that, however, was beside the question, the fact remaining the same, viz., that not even in his sorest straits, and when ruin in biggest letters was staring him in the face, had he asked the women of his family to, even by the slightest of loans, assist him in his distress.

It was not until the long journey was drawing to a close, that Leycester, notic-

ing the increasing agitation as well as deadly pallor of his companion, began to show symptoms of relenting. The intense anxiety and nervousness under which the unhappy lad was suffering, were evidenced by the trembling of his hands, and the quiver of the lip, on which not the faintest down suggestive of approaching manhood was as yet traceable. He looked so young to be a sinner!—so young to have already tasted of the bitter cup which follows on detected guilt, that Guy, when the Train stopped at the Junction Station, good-naturedly brought him, from a neighbouring wayside "public," a wineglassful of British brandy.

"Here, boy," he said kindly, "drink a mouthful of this nectar, and keep your pecker up. If your mother were worse, you would have heard of it; and you

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mustn't go, you know, with a face a yard long, into her room."

"Thank you; I know; of course I do," murmured the culprit. "But it isn't only that; it's the trouble—the—"

"Exactly, but you had better not talk of it now. We shall be at Broadmere directly. Ah! there is old Elphinstone, and a young lady—your sister, of course—so pull yourself together and be a man."





CHAPTER VII.

THE MAJOR SHOWS A CLOVEN FOOT.

HE first impression made by
Major Brereton on his hitherto
unknown brother-officers was
not a favourable one. Guy Leycester at
once, and without taking the trouble to
even whisper his opinion, pronounced him
to be a "cad."

"If I don't mistake," he said, "he's the very man who some years ago, left—on purpose, it was said—a woman's letter in the blotting-book belonging to his bachelor's room, at Lord Collington's,

where he had been staying. The husband—who was to succeed him en garçon in the room—found it, and there was the devil's own row. But it was hushed up somehow. I think," musingly, "I'll mention Lord Collington's name some day, just to see how the fellow looks. If he turns out to be the same man, we must get rid of him, you know, some way or other. The woman who wrote the letter had money of her own, I fancy, and they wanted to make it out a case for divorce; but that cock wouldn't fight, and so the-By Jove! I was going to say their names are living together, and let us hope, in harmony still."

Meanwhile the object of these remarks had met Lady Gregorie and her friend out riding, and had at once, and in the most free and easy manner, claimed ac"I hope," the Major, addressing Sir Wilfred's wife, said, "that you differ from the popularly-received opinion, that once in every seven years everything and everybody undergoes a change. It is more than seven years, Lady Gregorie, since you and I had the pleasure of meeting, and I am delighted to see that any change in you—in your appearance, that is to say—is decidedly to your advantage."

Lady Gregorie had been at first too much startled by Major Brereton's unexpected appearance and address to answer him; but she was no coward, and ner anger at his familiar compliment getting the better of her discretion, she suddenly checked her horse, and said,—

"Major Brereton, I cannot say that I, at

least, look back with any pleasure to the silly conduct—when I was a mere child at school-to which you refer; nor can you, I imagine, as a gentleman, think with any satisfaction of the advantage which you then took of my youth and inexperience. I have no wish to injure you, but you must be aware that if the past were known—"

"Neither Sir Wilfred Gregorie nor his wife would have quite such an easy time of it as, I am happy to think, is the case with them now. But, I ask you and you also, Miss Vidal—why, in Heaven's name, should the past be known? are old friends, we three,—knew another years ago at Bruges, and, being old friends, what so natural as that I should come and call, and that you and Miss Vidal should receive me—I will not

say with open arms, but with as much cordiality as you are in the habit of displaying towards the generality of your husband's brother officers?"

He looked at her scrutinisingly as he spoke, and ah! how bitterly did Florence at that moment regret her cowardly folly in that she had not, when first she heard the name of Brereton, made a clean breast of it to her husband.

"It cannot be," she faltered. "I have said nothing to Sir Wilfred of—of my Belgian school days, and he would think it so strange, your seeming to be intimate with me."

"But I would not seem intimate," smiled Brereton. "You may trust me entirely. I would not for the world get you into a scrape. Miss Vidal, you have stood our friend before, and I expect that you will help us now."

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He raised his hat (for he was out of uniform) as he spoke, and, touching his horse lightly with his whip, rode briskly away. He had, he flattered himself, executed his initiatory movement skilfully and well. The important fact that the Colonel of the regiment was as yet entirely in the dark as regarded a not unimportant episode in his wife's early history, had now become an established fact, and therefore, in the course which lay before him, there was more plain sailing than he had previously ventured to anticipate. Lady Gregorie was an uncommonly handsome woman, handsomer ten times over than she had been in her bread-andbutter days, when he, seated on the chilly stone rampart of the Bruges canal, played Romeo to the Juliet of the English Mees; and, in his mind's eye, the Major, although

the first glory of his youth had departed, and the "wild freshness of morning" no longer stirred the thinning curls that had once adorned his head, foresaw in the dim future, certain potentialities which, as he rode along the quiet lanes, brought a smile of anticipated triumph to his lip. The unlooked-for presence of Miss Vidal on the scene of action, was not altogether satisfactory to the Major. A far more "knowing card" was she than the handsome, unsuspicious woman who, as a girl, he had found ductile as wax within his hands. Ten years, or nearly so, had elapsed since he had made that notable discovery; and one glance at the fair Emily's discontented countenance, and features pinched by the wearing sickness of hope deferred, was sufficient to convince him that she who had been quick-witted then, was even more quick-witted now. To checkmate both these women—neither party being in the secret of his little game—must be now his object. The task would not be an easy one, but Louis Brereton, calling to mind sundry passages in his earlier career, told himself that it was one to which his powers were not inadequate.

"Yes," he said to himself complacently, "I ought to be able to do it, and, what is more, I will. Failure is a word which in this case shall have for me no meaning."

Whilst thoughts such as these were whirling through the busy brain of the newly-gazetted Major, the two women whose future fates—in so far as they were intermingled with his own—formed the subjects of his lucubrations, were, in no spirit of charity, giving voice to their opinions regarding him.

"Oh, Em!" Lady Gregorie, as soon as they were out of the man's hearing, exclaimed, "what shall we do? He is so awfully familiar; and oh! how old and ugly he has grown! I should not have known him if he had not spoken to me."

"Should not you?" rejoined her companion. "Well, I cannot say that I perceive much difference; but then I never thought him so wonderfully handsome as you did."

"I was a goose, and made a swan of the wretch," said poor Florence, whilst tears of mortification welled up to her eyelids. "I read once, in one of Lord Lytton's novels, and I can feel now how true the saying is, that 'There is no anguish like the memory of an error of which we feel ashamed.' And I am so

ashamed of having even fancied—child although I was, and ignorant—that I cared for Brereton; and now he will come, in his detestably off-hand way, and will try to make it appear that we are old friends."

"Well, dear, and so, for the matter of that, you are," Miss Vidal says sweetly, "and of course Sir Wilfred, until it is explained, will think it odd. If I were in your place, I would contrive to receive him at first without witnesses, and then you could complain afterwards of him, or at least mention to the Colonel, that you think his manner objectionable, and that he will be no credit to the regiment. You know the sort of thing to say."

"Exactly; but then, you know, Wilfred must, sooner or later, see us together; and I am afraid he would never think it possible that any man, however little he might be accustomed to good society, could, on so short an acquaintance, speak to any lady, let alone his Colonel's wife, in the way he *spoke* to me just now. Oh, Em, dear, I am dreadfully frightened! and I do so wish that I had been brave enough to tell my husband everything from the first. He would not have minded anything then, but now all his old prejudices against what he calls 'girls' schools' will revive, and he will jump at all sorts of untrue conclusions."

"It is probably those stupid letters that have done all the mischief," said Emily, as, with her small patte de velours she gently stroked the glossy neck of the Colonel's second charger. "You see the wretch has unfortunately something that he could show—"

"Oh!" cried Florence, letting, in her alarm, the reins fall from her hand, upon her lap, "you do not really think—even if he has kept the silly things—that he would dare to show them?"

"Not if it is to his own interest to keep them back. But there is one thing, dear Flo, that you must ever bear in mind, namely, that you must be beyond measure careful not to make an enemy of Louis Brereton. 'Hell,' so some poet has written, 'has no fury like a woman scorned,' but, in my opinion, a man who is foiled, is capable of winning for himself a still hotter place, down below, than we can earn. You must not—however indignant you may feel—say anything either of or to him which may wound his vanity, and incite in him a spirit of revenge. If I mistake not, our friend has a nasty

temper of his own, and, for my part, if I were in your place, I would let the sleeping dog lie."

"How gladly would I follow your advice; but my fear is that he will not let this poor dog" (touching her breast lightly with her gauntleted hand) "rest in peace. Ah, if he only would, how thankful I should be! And what is it that he can possibly hope to gain by tormenting me? Cannot you, dear Em, try to make him see the cruelty—when I am so happy—of working mischief between Wilfred and me."

The simplicity of this suggestion amuses Emily. She, however, betrays no sign of her inward sensations, but says, with an open-heartedness of manner which completely hoodwinks her friend,—

"My poor dear, I only wish that I

could help you. It must be so dreadful to feel oneself in a man's power. Still, there is one thing-I hardly like to propose it, however, and one could scarcely expect that Major Brereton would give in to the plan—"

"But what is it?" Florence asked impetuously. "Tell me what it is, and then I can be in some sort a judge of whether my husband is likely to bewell, I fear that I must say the worddeceived by it."

Miss Vidal hesitated for a moment, and then said deprecatingly,—

"My idea is, I daresay, a foolish one, but it flashed across me that I might or rather that we together might—lead Sir Wilfred to think that I, and not you, was the heroine of the Bruges adventure. I have not thought about details, and I daresay you will deem the notion too absurd for consideration."

"Not at all, dear, and I feel most grateful for your thought of immolating yourself in my favour; but I do not think that Sir Wilfred—"

"Could be induced to credit the story. I have no doubt that you are right," Miss Vidal said, and her tones, although her cheeks had slightly flushed, were still sympathising and affectionate. "Sir Wilfred is not very likely to believe that any man in his senses, who had been given two girls to choose from, would select the one who happened to be ugly."

"Now, Em, dear, that is really unkind," Lady Gregorie, almost with tears exclaimed. "You did not let me finish my sentence—and the idea of calling yourself ugly! What I meant to say was this,

that if, as I fear, this horrid man is bent on compromising me, he is not likely to act so as to turn Sir Wilfred's attention in your direction. You see what I mean, dear, don't you?" added poor Florence, who little dreamt that by a few thoughtlessly-spoken, but vanity-wounding words she had done more injury to her cause than any terms of endearment, any acts of kindness, could thenceforth effectually cancel

"Of course I understand, dear Flo. Pray do not think I was silly enough to mind," said Em urbanely. "But look, there is Freddy! And riding Captain Leycester's horse too! Now if I were Sir Wilfred, that is the man I should be jealous of, and not such a poor creature as Louis Brereton "

The two equestrians have arrived within

a few yards of the Colonel's temporary residence in Royalty Square, and the first object which meets their view is a beautiful boy—Sir Wilfred's only son—who is perched (his bare, four-year-old legs only reaching half way to the termination of the saddle-flaps) on a tall chesnut horse, which a brother officer, on leave between returns, has put at the temporary disposal of Guy Leycester. That good-natured soldier, having come to the Square in order to pay a visit to the Colonel's wife, had been pounced upon by her son and heir, and so coaxed and wheedled that he had dismounted, and placed the delighted boy in his place upon the saddle. child's hand—for it was not without trepidation that he felt the horse move onwards beneath his feather weightwas holding tightly by the collar of his

friend's coat, whilst the latter led the tall charger carefully along the silent road. But in spite of these precautions against an accident, Lady Gregorie's maternal fears were excited by the scene she witnessed.

"Oh, Captain Leycester," she exclaimed, "is he safe? Is the horse certain not to plunge or shy?"

"Not at all certain," answered Guy imperturbably; "but if he does, Freddy means to sit him—don't you, Freddy? like a man."

"But he might fall. Thank you very much for taking care, but—Freddy, darling, won't you come on mother's horse? You are so fond of Hotspur, you know, and you can give him a piece of sugar when we go in."

But even this tempting bribe proved

ineffectual in luring Master Freddy from the proud position which he felt himself to be filling. Lifting up his shrill treble in defiance, he said boldly,—

"Me don't like riding two on a horse. Make him gee-up, Captain Leycester," and the young rebel knocked his little fat legs against the saddle-flaps with as much self-assurance as if he were riding a steeplechase for a wager.

"Naughty boy," said the mother fondly, and the dispute seemed likely to be a prolonged one, when fortunately Sir Wilfred Gregorie suddenly appeared upon the scene. He took in the situation at a glance, and with a terse question addressed to the child of, "What are you doing up there, young shaver?" speedily brought down the delinquent from his vantage ground.

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"I hope he has not been boring you too much," said the Colonel, addressing, with the cordiality of an equal, the officer amongst his subordinates with whom he was most intimate, and who was preparing, after saying a few conventional words to the ladies, to remount his horse. "He is a good little chap when he is kept in order, but he is safe to turn out ill, with Lady Gregorie as Commander-in-chief."

"Don't believe him, Captain Leycester," laughed Florence, as her husband lifted her from the saddle, "and do come in and have some tea. I am sorry that Freddy was so troublesome, but it is almost your own fault, for being so good to him."

As a matter of course, Guy protested that the trouble was a pleasure; and then,

having offered a polite excuse for not joining Lady Gregorie's tea-party, he, with a graceful salute to the ladies, rode away.

"Well," said Emily, as she and her hostess ascended the stairs together, "I repeat what I said before, that if I were a husband, I should be jealous of Guy Leycester."

"There is safety—let us hope—in multitudes," was Florence Gregorie's careless reply. "There is always some new married lady being talked of as Captain Leycester's innamorata of the hour. The last is one Mrs Mansfield, whom he calls his aunt, but who, it is thought, is no more relation to him than is the Queen of the Sandwich Islands. However, the fable amuses him perhaps, and does no one else any harm."

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CHAPTER VIII.

LADY GREGORIE IS UP IN ARMS.

is caught at last," said Captain Boldero, one afternoon to a pleasant little gathering of ladies who, at an "afternoon" given by the wife of a Broadmere notability, were discussing the small local topics of the hour. The Officer in question was—as a fetcher and carrier of gossip, an individual whose society was much appreciated by the fair sex; nor did the fact that he had earned (in part owing to the feminine nature of

his tastes, but also on account of his baptismal appellation of Francis) the sobriquet in the regiment of "Miss Fanny," in any degree tend to diminish the warmth of the welcome which in feminine circles was accorded to him. The number of those of his sex who either find pleasure, or affect to do so, in the mild pastimes known as afternoon tea, is sufficiently limited, to account, in a great degree, for Captain Boldero's popularity.

"Oh, not really!" exclaimed a rather pretty woman, the wife of the lately-appointed Broadmere Barrack - master. "Surely a girl like Miss Durant—"

"I mentioned no names," put in Miss Fanny sententiously, "and I must enter my protest against being quoted as an authority in the matter."

"Oh, we all know who the lady is,

so you need not be so cautious," broke in a cheery-looking spinster, who, having no matrimonial designs either on her own account or on that of others to disturb her mind, could venture to speak it plainly; "and," she added, with a laugh, "there is nothing libellous in the accusation, unless it is suggested that Captain Elphinstone means nothing serious by his attentions to the young lady in question."

"I don't believe a word of it," said the wife of a rich Broadmere mine-owner whose daughters would have "fortunes" of their own, and whose dinner invitations to the well-to-do and popular infantry captain had neither been few nor far between; "and I shall not do so till I see in the papers that he is actually married. Captain Elphinstone has, we know, been talked about for so many girls."

"Not owing, I think, to any fault of his," put in Miss Staniforth; but what she may have been about to add was intercepted by Captain Boldero, who, albeit a frequent sower of strife, was nevertheless anxious for the maintenance of "peace within the borders;" and he felt at the present juncture no small degree of alarm lest his voice should be drowned by the excited clamour of female obstructionists.

"Well, well," he said soothingly, and addressing himself more especially to the sceptical parent of three pleasing and not portionless girls, "there may be no truth in the reports that are flying about. Elphinstone is not, one would think, the kind of man to marry an obscure girl, whose brother—but we need not, perhaps, mention him—poor fellow, is certainly no credit to any family; but then, you see,

Lady Gregorie has taken these Durants up so violently, and the girl is striking-looking—not exactly beautiful, perhaps, but yesterday, when I saw her in Lady Gregorie's carriage, and with Elphinstone sitting opposite to them, and looking—Well, as men do look when they are in love—into her eyes, it struck me that the young lady was very fair to see."

"And so you at once decided that he was what you call caught?" sneered Mrs Mansfield, the wife of the Barrack-master, the milk of human kindness in whose system had become "turned" by the neglect on Lady Gregorie's part to enter with her into the bonds of friendship. "If that is all from which you draw your conclusions—"

"Not conclusions—say suspicions, please," said Captain Boldero sweetly, "which that

drive caused me to entertain. Its object evidently was to inspect that pretty honeymoon-suggesting old house called Ivy Combe—"

"I know," interrupted more than one voice. "A dear old place, not far from the Junction Station."

"Exactly. Well, Ivy Combe is to be let."

"And you forthwith made up your mind that Captain Elphinstone took his bride-elect to that secluded cottage in order that she might decide on its merits as a future residence! Really, Captain Boldero," laughed Mrs Mansfield, "you are easily carried away by your imagination."

"Well, time will show whether or not I am wrong in my conjectures," rejoined Captain Boldero. "In the event, however, of Elphinstone having at last found his fate, you, and indeed all of us who are interested in his welfare, will be glad to learn that this is not a case of encan-aillement. It has been stated on good authority that, during the reign of William the Fourth, one Lady Emily Durant held some appointment in the Royal Household, and that—"

"Oh," said the Broadmere Society Queen, "most families can, in an emergency, contrive to rake up from their family histories some big name or other, in order to give a colouring to the idea that they themselves have a right to figure among the aristocracy. I conclude that it is Lady Gregorie who has set this idea going. She must feel rather ashamed of patronising such very obscure people—to say nothing worse of them—as these Durants."

The utter absurdity of this last suggestion was so palpable, that Captain Boldero, although ready enough as a rule to say flattering things of the Colonel's wife, felt that in this instance to take up the cudgels in her defence would expose himself to needless ridicule. Under these circumstances, and taking into consideration the fact that he had already worked up his audience into a state of excitement which rendered more than one of their number deaf to the voice of reason, he deemed it expedient to take his departure, leaving the drop of poison which he had administered, to do its unfailing work. He was not an ill-natured man, and to do any human creature a really "ill turn" was as far as possible from his intentions, but nature had cast his inner being in a small

mould, and it was that being's plague to crave for the trifling excitements which are to be found in the society of tattling-loving women, and in the puerile satisfaction of being the first to hint at a piece of startling news.

That Lady Gregorie had, what in everyday parlance is called "taken a fancy" to Helen Durant, was perfectly true, and, previous to the unwelcome appearance of Major Brereton upon the sunlit stage of her happy life, she showed, in many a kind and womanly fashion, the interest which she took in the gentle yet eminently helpful girl, whose misfortunes had given rise to so much general as well as individual sympathy. As the days ran on into weeks, and Captain Elphinstone's visits to the Shanty grew more frequent, Lady Gregorie's interest

in the case increased; and when the idea that such an advancement in life as an union with a man so in every way eligible as the much-sought-after Captain was possible for Helen had once entered the pretty head of kind-hearted, volatile Florence, the latter determined to assist, as far as lay in her power, in bringing about a consummation so eminently desirable. It was true that in so acting she would be setting at defiance her husband's often openly-expressed wish to keep the Officers of his regiment untrammelled by the bonds of wedlock: true also was it that in a general way she, as the pretty and admired wife of the Colonel, not only enjoyed, but looked upon as a right, the attentions of her husband's military subordinates; but Captain Elphinstone, not only in his character of an excellent parti, but as being, both in temperament and habits, a man standing out alone amongst the butterflies and danglers of the hour, was one whose innocent gallantries she could, as regarded her own feelings, easily dispense with. On the other hand, and—quoad her husband's fancy to keep his officers, after the example of the Zulu king's young warriors, unhampered by domestic ties, Lady Gregorie (excellent wife although she was) looked upon the notion as a mere fad, and went her own quiet, but effectual way to work, in order to circumvent Sir Wilfred's autocratic wish.

"Of course it would be different if Rowley Elphinstone were such an one as Guy," she said one day to her friend Emily Vidal. "If he were in the habit now, of making love to girls, I should be very

careful—kind as he has been to the Durants —not to throw dear Nellie in his way."

"Of course," responded Em, as she peered) (for the friends were driving in Florence Gregorie's Victoria) through the deep fringe of her parasol at her companion. "It is not Guy Leycester's vocation to make victims of any but married women."

"Oh," rejoined Florence, with a laugh so light and careless that any further chaffing was, as regarded the "Lion's" relations with his Colonel's wife, felt by Miss Vidal to be out of place, "I am not at all sure that poor Guy is not sometimes more to be pitied than the ladies who are supposed to be his prey. However, I can quite enter into Captain Elphinstone's dislike to this occupation by the Durants of Mrs Denham's house. He has suggested that pretty Ivy Combe

Cottage was a place to which they might The man who farms the land which lies about it, is living there with his wife, but as Captain Elphinstone has heard that three or four of the rooms could be made comfortable for lodgers, he and I, and possibly Miss Durant, may drive there some afternoon and see what the place is like."

"I think," suggested Em, after a pause, during which she was endeavouring to make up her mind as to the amount of plain speaking on which she could venture with her friend, "that you would perhaps act wisely in not allowing Major Brereton to see you on apparently familiar terms with other men. It would perhaps exasperate him, render him less easy to manage. He hints at being—or having been—in love with you."

"I do not understand you," Florence broke in haughtily. "What you seem to imply is really too sickening. Major Brereton is a low wretch, for whom horse-whipping is too good; and you talk to me of his love,—his love for me, Colonel Gregorie's wife," and as she said the words, the angry toss of her small head went near to jerking one of Mrs Heath's newest things in hats into the carriage-road. "I should like," setting her pearly teeth viciously together, "to see him flogged!"

"I can understand your feeling," Miss Vidal, with much amiability of manner, rejoined; "but as that is a pleasure which you are not likely to enjoy, I recommend you—for your own good solely, dear Florence—to be prudent."

Lady Gregorie vouchsafed no answer to this remark, and during the remainder of the drive silence reigned between the so-called friends.



CHAPTER IX.

MISS VIDAL PUTS HERSELF FORWARD.

Luncheon is over in the Royalty Square "mansion," and the two ladies—Freddy having been captured by the head-nurse for the purpose of a walk round the Square—are left in peace to talk over their coming gaieties, their dresses, and their anxieties. In Lady Gregorie's mind, the latter have for the moment greatly the preponderance, a circumstance which is rendered evident by a slight pucker in her low,

Miss Vidal puts Herself Forward. 161 classic forehead, and by her tone of voice as she says,—

"I hope, dear Em, that you have not quite set your heart on going to this tiresome garden-party on Thursday. That horrid man is certain to be there, and I cannot endure the thought of meeting him. If you do not mind, I will write an excuse to Lady Indiscarra."

"But, dear Flo, you have no excuse," breaks in Miss Vidal eagerly; "and, besides, what is the use of putting off the evil day? The sooner it is over, and Sir Wilfred has seen you and Major Brereton together, the better. My advice is altogether disinterested, for you can hardly hate the idea of seeing the man more than I do; but there is nothing more foolish than being afraid, excepting, perhaps, showing that you are so. What you is altogether disinterested.

you must do is to look your prettiest, and—which is of still more consequence—your jolliest; for if you display a *dégagé* air, he must see that you have what the Irish call a 'strong back,' and then he will be afraid to carry the war into the enemy's country."

Lady Gregorie shakes her head mournfully as she murmurs,—

"I don't believe in his being afraid. He would not have dared to address me as he did the other day if he hadn't felt that he had me completely in his power."

"Which, of course, as long as he has the letters, you are; but his holding them in terrorem over you is such a thoroughly ungentlemanly act that he will not, I feel persuaded, do anything very outrageous. Our object must be to

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get the letters from him; and perhaps, if we go to Lady Indiscarra's party, I may have an opportunity of speaking to him without witnesses, and finding out the price he puts upon them."

Before her departure for the gardenparty, to which Emily Vidal insisted that her hostess should, in her society, betake herself, the anxious woman summoned courage to ask her husband his opinion of the latest addition to the Corps.

"Do you think he's nice?" she asked.

"He is an ugly man, certainly."

"Deuced ugly. But not a bad soldier I should say. Hardly a gentleman though. But why do you ask? He is not an afternoon tea-party man. We have enough of these already, without him. By-the-way, I met Elphinstone walking out with that pretty Miss Durant, this morning, so I sup-

pose we shall have another married man in the regiment soon. What a bore it is! I wish the women would let them alone—"

"Or that they would let the women alone," amended Florence, with her pretty smile. "You should not have set the example, you wicked Wil, if you did not mean it to be followed! The Colonel, though, I suppose, like the King, can do no wrong."

"Not in his wife's eyes, I hope," Sir Wilfred, patting her fair cheek affectionately, rejoined. "But if we are to go to this garden-party is it not time to be getting yourself up? Your friend Miss Vidal has, I suspect, been hard at work at it for an hour past; and, Flo, between ourselves," added the Colonel, as he knocked the ashes from his cigarette, "I don't think she pays, when all's done, for the trouble. I never saw a girl more gone off than your friend. She was never what one could call good-looking, but now she is positively plain. I cannot, for the life of me, see what you can find to like in her."

"One does not like one's friends only for their looks, I hope!" said Lady Gregorie, as she gathered together her working materials, preparatory to leaving the room. "She is very warm-hearted and affectionate—"

"Is she really, do you think?" the Colonel says lazily. "Well, do you know that she rather gives me the idea of a snake in the grass. I have a creepy feel when she comes near me."

"Ah, that is because you do not admire her. As for me, I agree with the copy-book that it is better to be good than pretty."

"I never could understand why women should not be both," remarked her hushand.

"Now, you bad man!" she retorted, stopping behind him, and laying her two hands lovingly on his broad shoulders, "you know that you like them better when they are just the very least bit in the world. bad."

"Nonsense! Go and dress, child," he said impressively, whereupon her ladyship tripped away in double quick time to do his bidding.

Champion Hill—the beautiful family place from which Lord Indiscarra had not yet, by the smoke and wickedness of the big neighbouring town, been driven to more remote quarters—is situated at the distance of about seven miles from the Barracks, and had long been spoken of admiringly by the

surrounding neighbourhood as the very place of all others for a garden-party. Circumstances had, however, been hitherto against that pleasant form of festivity being enjoyed at the Hill. There had been a long minority, an impecunious and withal strait-laced dowager had set her face, resolutely against youthful friskiness, and, to crown all, Irish rents had been so badly paid, that Lady Indiscarra had been advised to shut up the family mansion in England, and vegetate for a few years in the sister isle. But things were altered now. The young lord had attained his majority, and an education at Eton and Oxford having confirmed his preference for English life, the O'Flynn family—consisting of the dowager, with her two sons and three daughters—shook the bog earth of their native land from off their feet, and settled themselves permanently at Champion Hill.

As the two well-bred cobs which drew the Colonel's sociable dashed rapidly along the country lanes towards their destination, they passed many carriages and horsemen who were evidently, from the gala dresses of the ladies, about to share in the amusements which, according to report, had been plentifully provided for their entertainment at the Hill. Amongst those—who trotted by, and raised their hats to the ladies as they passed—was, on his well-broken charger, Major Brereton. Lady Gregorie would have given half her diamonds — and they, by the way, would have realised no unimportant sumcould she have succeeded in looking, when her enemy took the liberty of saluting her, perfectly calm and unconcerned; but

she was no actress, and the flush which mantled her cheeks was quickly succeeded by so deadly a pallor that Sir Wilfred, from his place in front of the two ladies, saw and noticed the change.

"What is the matter, Flo? You are not ill, are you?" he asked; and felt not a little relieved—for Lady Gregorie's health was at that time giving some cause for uneasiness—when Miss Vidal, coming to the rescue, said,—

"It must be that dreadful tanyard. Take my eau-de-Cologne, dear. Really people who have such horrid-smelling works should be obliged to keep them at a distance from the highroad."

The explanation thus promptly given appeared for the moment to satisfy Sir Wilfred, but a turn in the road unfortunately brought the Major again in view,

and as on this occasion his bow was emphasised by a somewhat familiar smirk, the anger of his superior officer was roused, and he said, with some heat,—

"What the devil does the fellow mean by grinning like that? I don't know him except officially, and I don't intend to. Perhaps, however," he, addressing Miss Vidal, added more calmly, "the man may be an acquaintance of yours, and, if so, I beg your pardon for my involuntary rudeness."

Finding herself thus appealed to, Em, who for reasons of her own had secretly favoured the notion of taking upon herself the part of Juliet which had been originally played by her friend, blushingly pleaded guilty to a portion at least of the "soft impeachment."

"Major Brereton," she said, "is an old

friend of my father's; but I never liked him, and when I heard that an officer of his name was gazetted to your Regiment, I was in hopes—which, of course, was very stupid of me—that he was not the man I knew. I was more vexed than I can tell you when I found he was the same, for I felt sure that neither you nor Flowould like him. There is no harm in him, I believe—"

"I daresay not; but you must excuse me for saying that I do not think him very well worth talking about," interrupted Sir Wilfred, who was always annoyed when Miss Vidal either spoke of, or addressed his wife as "Flo." "I beg, however, that you will not think it necessary to ignore your old acquaintance because you do not happen to be at home. There is, as you say, no harm,

doubtless, in Major Brereton; and now, as the Lodge gates of the Hill are in sight, we will talk, if you please, of something more agreeable."

"I told you how it would be," said Florence, when the greetings which Lady Indiscarra stood at the door to receive were over, and she-Lady Gregoriecould whisper a few confidential words in her friend's ear. "Wilfred only half believes your story, and he will now be dreadfully on the watch. There will be wheels within wheels. He will find from Major Brereton that he never knew Mr Vidal, and—oh! why was it necessary to enter into all those particulars?"

"Because I was taken aback, and thought of nothing but helping you. you could have seen your own face—so wan, so haggard—you would not wonder now that I was frightened at the thought of what might happen next."

"Forgive me, dear, I was ungrateful and unjust; but the constant fear in which I live is so terribly trying, that sometimes I really hardly know what I say or do."

"I know it. I can understand how you are suffering, and I would do anything in my power to put an end to your worries. If you think it advisable, dear, I will talk—confidentially, of course—to the man, to-day. He is no fool, and must be well aware that to compromise you with Sir Wilfred would be the most stupid thing that he could do. A case, you know, of killing the goose—I mean, of course, letting the cat out of the bag—that lays the golden eggs."

"But what eggs? I do not under-

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stand, and never shall, I suppose, what his object in keeping those letters can be."

"Probably nothing more—but that, you may say, is bad enough—than to make people fancy that he has a right to seem familiar with you. However, I will try and find out to-day what his motive is, and when that is ascertained, we shall know better how to act."





CHAPTER X.

PAST, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN.

"Vidal, that you do not intend keeping me at arms' length, as her ladyship seems disposed to do. She refused just now to be introduced to me. I saw the whole thing from behind a holly bush near which she was standing. That nice boy Indiscarra offered to present me to her. I didn't say a word about having known her before, and she owes me one, I think, for that. Well, what do you think happened?"

"I can't guess, but I am sure that she did not mean to be disagreeable."

"Not mean—I like that, when she turned away as proud as a queen, and told him point blank that she did not wish to know any more of the officers."

"I think you must have misunderstood her," Em says deprecatingly. "Lady Gregorie is the last person in the world to give herself airs."

"Lady Gregorie!" repeats the Major bitterly. "And it used to be Flo and Louis!"

"But that was long ago, you know, and when a girl is married, things are so different."

"Yes, when the husband is present; but at other times, I don't see why she should not be Flo again to me. I was very fond of her, you know."

"I daresay, and you have had time to get fond of twenty girls since then," said Em, who was beginning to be disgusted with the man's impertinence and folly. "But the truth is, that my friend is so worried and annoyed, owing to her own silly imprudence in not having told Sir Wilfred of your previous acquaintance—"

"Acquaintance indeed! It was something more than that, I reckon."

"Very little, if anything. I was, if you remember, present whenever you met, and," she added, laughing, "if you call your interviews with Florence courting, all I can say is that I do not."

"What do you say to the letters? They, at least, are something more than mere civility notes."

"I suppose they are. Girls of sixteen are tolerably certain, when they do write, VOL. I.

to write nonsense. You have destroyed them, I suppose, long ago?"

"Indeed I have not. They are precious to me as the apple of my eye. But for them, it would seem like a dream that Florence ever loved me."

"Well you had better think of it as a dream, and give them up. Lady Gregorie has already, as you know, asked for them in vain; and now I ask you if you think it is quite honourable andand gentlemanlike to keep them against her wish? It is, I warn you, a dangerous thing to do, for Lady Gregorie is a very impulsive person, and if she frets much longer over this business, I should not be surprised if she were to tell the whole story to Sir Wilfred. You had better, therefore, follow my advice, and keep the stupid affair quiet."

The walk in which these two former acquaintances are holding this secret confabulation runs parallel with a thick yew hedge. It—the walk, id est—is carpeted with closely-mown turf, and from it there is a slope to a narrow but swiftly running river in which small brown trout abound, and across which a pretty rustic bridge has, long years before, been thrown. Over the rail of this bridge long ivy tendrils hang, and dwarf ferns have sown themselves plentifully in the interstices of the stone work. At intervals along the walk, snug recesses have been clipped, and in each of those recesses there has been placed a seat. Into one of these the Major and his companion, at this juncture in their conversation, place themselves, and he, after a few minutes given to thought, says,—

"You, or rather Lady Gregorie, should have the letters at once, if it were in my power to let her have them, but unfortunately they are no longer in my hands--"

"Impossible! I cannot believe it!" exclaims Miss Vidal excitedly. "For your own sake, if not for hers, I feel sure that you would not allow another person to have possession of those thoughtlesslywritten effusions."

"It is by a mere accident," he rejoins, "that I no longer have them. They got mixed up—owing to my abominable carelessness with some other papers which were consigned for safe keeping to my solicitor. Unfortunately he—the lawyer is, like too many of his trade, a man without any sense of honour. He has lately sent me in a bill of costs which is too shamefully exorbitant for me even to dream of paying it; and because I refuse to do so, he has kept my papers—a not uncommon dodge with rascals of his description—until such time as I—a very unlikely thing to happen—pay him his nefarious demand."

During the delivery of this speech, Major Brereton kept his eyes fixed upon the ground. He held his walking-cane between his knees, and with it was making sundry digs at the daisies which were cropping up on the turf in front of him. The man was not entirely dead to self-respect, and if he had caught sight of the expression—that of scornful unbelief—which curled his companion's lip, methinks that the fact of being "found out" would have awakened even his hardened conscience to regret.

There is, to my mind, no more convincing proof of the moral superiority, in some respects, of women to men, than the fact that the former feel more surprised and shocked at the lapses from honour of the stronger sex than is, as a rule, the case with men when weaker vessels prove themselves capable of disloyal acts. Emily Vidal was no ingénue. She had heard from her childhood instances of the "dodges" of which men are capable who are either in what are called difficulties, or who are bent, at all costs, on enriching themselves; and she had long ere this gauged the extent of chicanery of which Major Brereton, in the furtherance of his own ends, was capable. As regarded the "rascally lawyer," whose name was not permitted to transpire, Em shrewdly suspected that he existed solely in the

Major's imagination. The man was probably in want of money, and not being able to screw his courage to the sticking-point of demanding payment on his own account, he summoned from the depths of his fancy a stalking-horse, on the shoulders of which he had saddled his treacherous and unmanly scheme. Miss Vidal's anger at the *ruse* was so great that she made no attempt to conceal from him the fact that he was unmasked.

"From what you have just said," she remarked calmly, "I gather that a sum of money paid to you by Lady Gregorie would ensure the delivering up of her letters."

"You are mistaken," he answered calmly. "I repeat again, that nothing would give me greater pleasure than to comply with your friend's request, but unhappily the power to do so does not

lie with me. This villain of a lawyer has got me under his thumb, and under it I expect that he will keep me."

"But," said Miss Vidal, after a pause, during which she looked carefully to the right hand and the left, in order to ascertain that no one was within earshot. "supposing that Lady Gregorie should be inclined to give money for the papers which you withhold, what is the price that would be demanded?"

"Well," mused the Major, "I am afraid that less than four hundred pounds would not induce my rascal to loose his hold over me. You see the bill of costs has been running on for years, and if one only writes half-a-dozen words to attorney, there is six-and-eightpence gone at once."

"The sum is certainly a large one,"

said Em, "and one which I am afraid that Lady Gregorie would not find it easy to pay. Perhaps, however, if you will tell me the lawyer's name, I may come to better terms with him."

"Not likely, I am afraid. However, I will send you his name and address, and you can make what you can of him."

"In the meantime," Emily, rising hur riedly from her seat, said, "I must ask you to refrain from doing anything which could possibly annoy or compromise Lady Gregorie. Sir Wilfred" (and here a blush of genuine shame suffused her cheeks), "has been led to believe that I, and not his wife, was the object of attraction to you, at Bruges. The deception has not been, as you may suppose, an agreeable one for me."

"Nor for me either, by Jove!" the Major, with a coarse laugh, broke in;

"and the Colonel must be a greater duffer than I took him to be, to believe anything so improbable. However," he continued, as he sauntered side by side with his companion towards a less-secluded portion of the grounds, "I pledge myself, remember, to nothing, excepting the sending back of the letters."

"Under cover to me—"

"Exactly, under cover to you," he, looking searchingly into the girl's eyes, repeated; "and now had we not better return to the festive scene? Even in our character of happily re-united lovers, we have already, I think, indulged in almost too long a tête-à-tête."

Thanks to Lady Gregorie's popularity, as well as to her own ingenious devices, she contrived, during the continuance of the garden-party, to effectually avoid

any compromising conversation with her enemy. She had noted, with an anxious heart, the lengthened dialogue which between him and Emily Vidal had taken place; and had persuaded the Colonel—who, indeed, was nothing loth—to leave the scene of gaiety earlier than the majority of the visitors to the "Hill," her object in doing so being to ascertain from her friend the result of her tête-à-tête with Major Brereton.

"Well, dear, what have you got to tell me?" the harassed woman says anxiously, when in her friend's dressing-room the two at length find themselves alone.

"Not much, I fear, that you will think satisfactory," replied Em, as she removed her hat, and leant back luxuriously in a low arm-chair; whilst Flor-

ence, who was tired and ill at ease, "lay down in her loveliness" on the pretty chintz-covered sofa that stood at the foot of Emily's virgin couch; "and now," the skilful diplomatist said, "I will give you a true and correct account—as far as I can remember what passed—of my mission."

The tale did not take long in the telling thereof, and when the climax was reached, Lady Gregorie, clasping her hands in dismay, ejaculated,—

"But this money! oh, whence am I to procure it? I would give it gladly if I had it, but now I see no hope of escape from the tormentor's toils."

"And if you could, I confess that I should hate to see you pay all that money to a villain," said Em. "Still," after a pause, "perhaps anything would be better than fretting yourself ill."

"But when there is no alternative, what is the use, dear, of thinking which way is the best or worst? I can no more give Major Brereton four hundred pounds than I can four thousand."

"Excepting by—but no, I will not say what I was going to; you would think the idea too wild—too impossible."

"Whilst, on the contrary, I may consider it very tame and feasible," smiled Florence. "At anyrate, tell me what the idea is, and let me decide upon its merits myself."

"Well you must not scold me if I am wrong, but I think I have heard you talk of certain diamonds which, because they are set in an old-fashioned way, you never wear. Now, could you not—as it is such an object with you to get back your letters—raise some money on the jewels?"

"Without really parting with them?

Oh, if I only could! I believe that they are worth much more than four hundred pounds; and if you could inquire for me at Salters' what he would give me for them, it would be so good of you. Of course, my name must not appear—that would be too fatal; but he does not know you by sight."

"He might therefore think that I had stolen them," laughed Em. "But I will—if you really wish it—run the risk. As you say, anything, perhaps, is better than living on thorns in this way. At anyrate, too, asking Salters the question can do no harm. I should like to see the diamonds; and if we were to brighten them up a little, the jeweller might be inclined to give more. But to be obliged in the end, perhaps, to sell them, and for such a wretch too! for I really do believe him capable of anything."

Perhaps if Lady Gregorie had been possessed of the same mania for precious stones which impels so many women to sacrifice their name and fame to the acquirement of brilliant gauds wherewith to adorn their persons, she would not so readily have given in to the notion which her friend had mooted; but she did not happen to be one of those weak specimens of her sex whose happiness can either be increased or lessened by the consciousness of being envied. The diamonds of which she had spoken to Emily Vidal, had lain unnoticed in her jewel-case for years. The setting was rococo, and the sum required for re-setting them would, she felt, be more profitably spent in other ways, and therefore it was that with a light heart she ran to her room for the faded leather cases in which reposed on their vellowed white satin beds her little-prized trinkets.

They were pronounced—and justly so by the spectatress to be "splendid!" and then the rubbing of them up, by the aid of rouge powder, commenced. It was agreed between the conspirators that during their drive on the following day, Emily—with a case containing an exquisite rivière of brilliants, and a smaller one, in which a sparkling pendant with a large diamond in the centre reposed safely in her velvet handbag, should leave the carriage and proceed on foot to the jeweller's shop. No word regarding the possible purchase on his part of the property was to be said to him, his appraisement thereof being all that he was called upon to give. Salter after a careful examination of the gems, pronounced the value of the *rivière* to be four hundred and ten pounds, and that of the pendant one hundred and eighty pounds. They were stones of the first water, he said, and hardly to be surpassed in beauty and value.

Whilst the jeweller still held in his hand the diamond *rivière*, the demon of acquisitiveness entered into Emily Vidal's breast! For a few moments she did battle against the foe, but he was too strong for her, and by the time she reached the carriage, his victory was no longer doubtful.

"What luck!" she almost hysterically exclaimed, as she threw the cases into Lady Gregorie's lap. "Mr Salter says that the value of the whole is fully four thousand pounds, and that the stones would fetch that sum in the market any day."



CHAPTER XI.

THE ADJUTANT FALLS IN LOVE.

that in every inhabited house there lurks a skeleton, with equal veracity may it be said that in every household there will be found materials—slight or plentiful as the case may be—for a romance. Within a radius of a mile from Broadmere Barracks there were located three households, in each of which there existed elements of mischief which were capable, under circumstances easily to be imagined, of being worked

up into a "story." At the Shanty, within whose walls Mrs Durant had been slowly recovering from the attack of brain fever which had laid her low, Rowley Elphinstone's visits of inquiry after the invalid, had, he hoped, not been so frequent as to give occasion amongst the gossips for remark. Owing to the combined facts that he was popularly supposed to be rich enough to marry, and also that Nature as well as Fortune had been generous to him, Captain Elphinstone had, from the time when he first, as a beardless second lieutenant, joined the Chalkshire Rifle corps, found himself rather a marked man amongst the many pleasant-mannered and goodlooking young fellows who like himself wore the dark-green uniform of the "sharp-shooters." He had, in point of

fact—being rather heavily handicapped not only with "filthy lucre," but with relations galore whose titles figured in Debrett—suffered not a little from the kindly-meant attentions of anxious mothers, and girls on the look-out—poor things—for an establishment. It is not every day—as my readers will, I think, be ready to admit—that a young officer, goodlooking, pleasant-mannered, and withal wealthy to the tune of three thousand pounds per annum, sheds his beams, like those of a veritable Prince Charming, on the middle-class society of a country town; but when he does so, the effect is naturally electrical. All things considered, Rowley Elphinstone was a prize which, in order to obtain, not a few young women had not shrunk from making some sacrifices of self-respect to obtain,—sacrifices

which, he—his nature being a chivalrous one, and his respect for the fair sex
great—regretted to find them capable of
organising. The "chaff"—as regarded
his successes—which from some of his
brother-officers he was doomed to undergo, offended rather than gratified him; indeed owing, as he believed he did, the said
successes to his wealth alone, any allusions to them became, after a short time,
positively distasteful to his feelings.

"I wish to Heaven," he said, one day after mess, to Lieutenant Cardew, a young gentleman who, being the son of a poor clergyman, did not come in for many of the sweet looks which were lavished on his superior officer, "that you would find something besides girls to talk about. It's always the same thing with you fellows. 'Maria' has given you

a flower, or 'Gertrude' has allowed you to keep her boot-lace—"

But here a roar of laughter interrupted him.

"As if girls used boot-laces!" exclaimed several voices at once; whilst one young-ster, who was apparently given to taking a more practical view of the subject in question than the rest, ventured to suggest buttons as the medium by which young ladies' boots were made fast above their insteps.

"Silvertop" (alias Dicky Dollars) "has one, I know," said the boy. "A round black thing, and he is thinking—at least so he told me once—of having it set as a tie pin, don't you know?"

"Bosh!" exclaimed the blushing victim of this cruel slander. "I never showed you anything of the kind. If I were Elphinstone now—"

"Oh, by Jove! stop that," Rowley was beginning, but Dicky proved for the moment absolutely irrepressible. His father, Lord Silvertop, had made—at least so it was popularly supposed—his "pile" during the American war. Many a business man, clever in the contracting line, had been enabled to turn not a few "almighty dollars"-honest or dishonest according to circumstances—in the fight, so-called, for freedom; but although his lordship was known to be wealthy, and Dicky was an only son, yet Nature having bestowed on him one of those chubby, roseate countenances which are apt to recall to the mind of a looker-on images of prize babies, and of calves ready fatted for a prodigal's return, romantic sensations in his regard were apt, even in the breasts of the most

designing of the sex, to be nipped in the bud. In addition to this misfortune—for as a misfortune poor Dicky's rubicund face might fairly be considered—it was his fate to be always more or less in love, and it was therefore with an air of genuine feeling that he said to Rowley,-

"Upon my soul and honour, old man, I'd give— No, on second thoughts, I don't know what I wouldn't give, if the girls would only make love to me for one half-hour as they do to you."

"Nonsense! Man alive, it isn't the girls, poor things, but their mothers; and I, for one, don't blame them. They know that when paterfamilias goes to kingdom come, his unmarried daughters will probably have little enough to keep body and soul together on, and so-"

"They spend their time in angling for

husbands for them! And they set to work too, in such a barefaced way! I verily believe that if you, Elphinstone, simple as you sit there, were to give out that you preferred walking on your head, half the mothers in Broadmere would declare that their daughters had a strong objection to progressing in any other way."

"I tell you what it is," put in Guy Leycester lazily (he was leaning his six feet two inches of handsome manhood against the wall, and taking occasional pulls at as good a cigar as could be obtained for "love"—id est, on tick, by one of the most inveterate smokers in the British army), "I consider it a do and a sell, for a fellow—say like you, Dicky, with no end of tin, to come into a regiment like ours. Why we haven't a chance. You dwarf us all."

But here another roar of laughter broke

in upon the speaker's remonstrance. They were "tickled by a straw," those foolish young fellows, and the comparison as regarded height between Leycester and the somewhat stumpy form of his brotherofficer, struck them as a superior stroke of wit. In the midst of the cachination, Elphinstone made his escape, unnoticed, from the room. He had, in fact, an appointment to keep, and not for the sake of a whole "rosebud garden of girls" would be have failed in his troth. was to an afternoon tea that he was bound, and taking into consideration the circumstance that Rowley's distaste for that institution had almost passed into a proverb, it was only an act of common prudence on his part to abstain from divulging the reason of his abrupt depart-He felt less than no call to exure.

plain, even to his friend Guy, that, just as "one star differs from another sun in glory," so, making due allowance for difference of dimensions, may one early tea-party stand aloof from others in interest and attraction. It was a very small affair, that reunion which Rowley Elphinstone would not, for any reward which could be offered to him, have failed to assist at. He himself was the only invited guest, the giver of the entertainment being no other than Helen Durant. The occasion of the festivity was the anticipated meeting—the first since the poor lady's illness-of Rowley and Mrs Helen had begged hard that Durant. Alf might be allowed to make one of the little party, but her mother had deemed it prudent to refuse.

"The poor boy feels so dreadfully dis-

graced," she said; "and Captain Elphinstone may not see his shamefacedness in the same light that we do. His being under such deep obligations to our friend, will naturally make him feel shyer than ever; and although you and I, darling, see nothing in our boy's tears to be ashamed of, yet he himself, poor fellow, would, I know, be ready to sink into the earth if he found that, whilst thanking Captain Elphinstone for his kindness, it was impossible to drive them back."

"Perhaps you are right, dear mother," Helen, after a few more minutes' thought, rejoined. "At the same time, I feel sure that Captain Elphinstone would never judge anyone—especially a fellowcreature who is down—either unjustly or uncharitably. And now, darling mother, you must rest quietly till Captain Elphinstone comes; and, above all things, let us beware of thanking him too much. You see, he has not yet made absolutely sure of obtaining the post in Canada which he hopes to succeed in getting for Alf, and if it should end in nothing, he will be the more vexed at having raised our expectations in vain. I do not mean the interview to be a long one," Helen, as she carefully arranged the white Shetland shawl upon the invalid's shoulders, added. "You must not tire yourself just when you are getting better. Ah! there is a ring at the bell. Now, mother dear, you must try to think that you have known Captain Elphinstone a long, long time;" and in truth, when the tall soldier in undress uniform entered the pretty drawing-room of the Shanty, the girl's manner to him was—without being either gushing or forward—almost like that of an old friend. But for the pretty blush, indeed, which rose suddenly to her cheeks, Captain Elphinstone might have been justified in thinking that she felt for him only as a sister.

"I have been telling mother," Miss Durant, when the introduction was over, said, "that she is not to talk, but to listen. I have promised her that we will make ourselves very pleasant—"

"Was not that rather a rash vow on your part?" interrupted Rowley, with a laugh. "I can answer for one of the two succeeding in the task, but as for the other, it will, I fear, be but a lame attempt after all. However, I am happy to say, that in default of being either playful or jocose, I have brought your brother's appointment to the post he

covets, in my hand. I am afraid he will find the climate rather trying—" he was continuing, but an expressive glance from Helen's large blue eyes warned him that he was treading on dangerous ground. "It is a thousand times better, of course," he, taking warning by the look, went on, "than the tropics, or anywhere near them, and I have known young fellows to have far better health in that part of Canada than they had at home. In the first place, there is little or no wind—"

"Which is a great advantage," Mrs Durant, plucking up courage, said. "But, whether my boy likes the climate or not, we cannot be too grateful to you for your kind and generous help. Nellie said," she continued, looking tenderly up at the tall girl who was hanging over her chair, "that I was not to thank you—"

"Oh, mother," remonstrated the girl, "I only warned you not to say too much, because disappointment and regret are so hard to bear; but we do thank you now with all our hearts, and I hope that Alfred—"

"Oh, when he leads a wholesome outof-door life, away from bad examples, I haven't a doubt of his doing well. I need not ask you if he can ride, for I never saw a spirited English lad who couldn't; and, besides, we had experience of his powers that way on one occasion. A dealer brought a vicious brute one day to the Barracks, in hopes of selling him. There was no mistaking the animal's character. He showed the whites of his eves-"

"And put back his ears, I suppose just as Silverface used to do, don't you remember, Nellie? in poor papa's time. But Alfred never was afraid of riding him. I used to be dreadfully frightened, but he always came back safe."

"As he did when he rode the dealer's nag, which other fellows were afraid to He'll make a capital mounted mount. police officer," continued Rowley encouragingly—for there were tears in the widow's eyes, and he lived in mortal dread of a breakdown—"and I have one or two old friends out there who will help him to keep straight."

"We shall miss the luxuries of this delightful house," Helen, being anxious to give an enlivening turn to the conversation, said. "In a few days I hope that my mother will be well enough to move to the hotel-"

"I hope so, but not to the Dragon, VOL. I. 0

surely," interposed Rowley. "The landlady is a capital woman, but the place is too noisy—too rowdy altogether. Now the Royal Hotel—the one which is at a stone's throw of the Colonel's house—would suit Mrs Durant a thousand times better."

"It is quieter, I have no doubt," Helen said seriously, "but I am afraid well, that the expense would be beyond our means. It is a horrid thing to talk of money, and always makes mother ill, but it is better, I think, to tell the truth. The Royal Hotel looks very comfortable and nice, but we have lived too long already at other people's expense, and till my uncle, who is mother's trustee, comes from abroad, we must, I fear, remain insolvent."

She strove her utmost to speak lightly, and as though the burden of obligation were not lying heavily on her girlish

breast, but Elphinstone saw that it was only through a brave effort that her tears were kept from falling, and he longed—as only a strong man who has never wasted his heart's best affections on frivolous and unworthy objects can long—to kiss away the rising tears, and bid her, within the shelter of his loving arms, forget the sordid, romance-destroying cares of life. She was, he felt, so true, —so free from guile,—so guiltless of any scheming or self-seeking thought; and then, although she was not, strictly speaking, beautiful—

"He felt that she was more,
One of those women, women dread,
Men fatally adore."

For a few passing moments his heart bounded with unwonted quickness within his breast; then, remembering the caution whispered to him by Helen—to refrain, in her mother's presence, from agitating topics, he said, with well-assumed composure,—

"If you would not think me officious, I would inquire the price at the Royal for bed and board for two ladies, who probably do not consume more food than sparrows. I daresay the difference between the charges there, and those at the other hotels, is not very great. I have generally found them pretty much the same all over the world. The good old 'Dragon' is not, of course, without its faults, but as the Denhams are coming home so soon—"

"It seems ungracious to say so," interrupted Helen, with a sigh, "especially after having been so very comfortable, and Captain Leycester having been so kind, but I almost wish that we had never come here."

For a second or two he looked into

her soft eyes searchingly. Could it be that the breath of scandal had tainted her pure ears with whispers of the truth, and that she, with an unblushing front (although a pang in that Guy Leicester's name had not escaped slander had wrung her heart), had alluded to this by many suspected liaison. The doubt—momentary as the lightning's flash—needed but one mute query of the honest eyes, to be set at rest, and Rowley felt ashamed of the suspicion that the *Una* who stood before him in her virgin purity had either heard the rumour which coupled Guy Leycester's name with that of Mr Denham's wife, or, having heard, had understood it. He had fallen—whilst thinking of his access of stupidity—into a brief reverie, from which he was aroused by hearing Helen say gently to her patient,—

"Mother, dear, you must not mind if I treat you like a baby and carry you off now. It is not difficult to keep this sick mother of mine in order," she said, with a smile, to Rowley. "When she is well c'est autre chose," she added, as the frail but still pretty little woman clung confidingly to the strong arm of her stately daughter, and together the pair moved slowly towards the door, which Captain Elphinstone held open for their egress. "Don't go quite directly," the younger woman, as they passed their visitor, said simply; "I will come back when my mother is on her sofa again."

"Pray do," rejoined Elphinstone; "and I hope you will be able to tell me that Mrs Durant is not likely to suffer from her exertions."



CHAPTER XII.

OUT OF EVIL GOOD MAY SPRING.

"TRUST that the effort which Mrs Durant has just made, has done her no harm?"

Captain Elphinstone, standing, Englishman like, with his back to the fireless grate, asks of Helen on her return.

"No, indeed. On the contrary, I think that seeing you has done her good," the girl replies. "She cried a little, and the tears relieved her. I often wish that I had inherited the power of weeping. Tears seem in some sort to wash a dry grief away."

"They may seem to, but they do not really soften sorrow," Elphinstone rejoins. "My dear Miss Durant, you should not wish for tears. To indulge in grief, as people call it, is a mistake, and one which no one who had ever really felt it, would be liable to fall into. Life at your age should be all sunshine, and if-may I go on? I have been longing, watching for an opportunity of asking you one question, but I have seen no sign—no look of encouragement."

And here the strong man, standing with his hands in his trousers' pockets, and with no betraying evidence of emotion in his stern, handsome face, fairly breaks down, and waits—with an inward agitation which would have better become a novice—for the reply of the blushing girl beside him. She finds it hard to speak, hard to find a fitting answer to

words so ambiguous as those which have been just addressed to her. She had never thought of Rowley Elphinstone as of a possible admirer; and although she could not be ignorant of the fact that Nature had not -quoad personal advantages—treated her in a niggardly fashion, no man had as yet shown signs of coveting her for his own. And yet for all that so it is, her female instinct tells her that the question of which Captain Elphinstone has made mention, is one which involves the happiness or otherwise of her whole future life, and this being the case, and understanding also that her reply must be waited for by her companion with some sensations of anxiety, she summons courage to say, in a tone that is half-playful and half-redolent of shyness,—

"What have I ever done or said to

make a friend so kind as you are think twice before asking me any question, however unusual it may be?"

Rowley's laugh at her reply causes them both to feel more at ease, so much so indeed, that when the former, without betraying any consciousness of manner, suggests that the question on the tapis may as well be settled in a sitting as a standing position, Helen has nearly recovered from the momentary confusion into which she had been thrown.

"My question is quite an every-day one," the soldier, drawing his chair very close to that of Helen, says. "It is one which is asked, I should imagine, many times in every day that passes, for it is simply this—Will you be my wife?"

The triteness of the language in which this all-important query is put, together

with the total absence of elaboration by which the demand is characterised, adds greatly to the startling effect on Helen of the proposal itself. It is strange, but the words had no sooner passed her admirer's lips than the Bible text of "Let your answer be yea or nay, for whatsoever is more than this cometh of evil," recur repeatedly to her mind. The extreme curtness of the terms in which the aspirant for her hand couched his appeal, is probably the cause of the singular persistence wherewith the Scripture words keep sounding in her ears. untiring repetition, added to the state of agitation into which the demand has in itself thrown her, has a bewildering effect upon her brain: she, however, is sufficiently herself to feel that in this especial instance, the Biblical counsel

must not be too literally followed. Nevertheless her answer comes with difficulty, and is as follows.

"How can I answer you, Captain Elphinstone? I have known you so short a time, and you have loaded us with obligations—"

"Ah! that is the devil—I beg you a thousand pardons—I mean the evil of it. You may think—and I, for one, cannot blame you if you do—that I am presuming on some trifling help—which it has cost me nothing to give—in order to bring forward some claim to your regard. But you would be quite wrong."

"I am sure I should be," the girl says eagerly, adding, almost with tears in her large grey eyes,—"Oh, Captain Elphinstone, how could you think so meanly of me?"

"I think meanly of you! Good heavens! I who know you to be the

sweetest,—the most perfect of God's creatures! Dear Miss Durant, my fate for life is in your hands. I am not so idiotic as to try and make you believe that I—a man who has passed his thirtieth year—have never fancied myself in love before, but I can truly say that you are the first of your sex to whom I have given my heart,—the first, moreover, whom I have wished to make my wife. You have known me but a short time, you say—and that is true, but you have perhaps seen me often enough to guess, at least, whether in time you might learn to return my love. Tell me, can you give me hope, or must I, like the lover in the ballad, 'to the greenwood go-a lone and banished man'?"

He smiles as he quotes the words, and Helen to whom the ballad of the "Nut-brown Maid" is familiar, blushes deeply as the recollection of its *finale* crosses her mind.

To add to her confusion, she remembers that only a few days previously she and Captain Elphinstone had talked together of the famous old-world poem, and that they had differed in opinion as regarded the amount of wrong which it was advisable, or indeed possible (when that wrong was inflicted by a lover) for a woman to submit to.

"I draw the line at jealousy," Elphinstone had said. "A girl who really and truly loved, could never bear with equanimity to be told by her sweetheart that he had found a maid fairer than ever she was. No, no, the thing is out of nature, and impossible to the last degree."

Helen clearly recollected how merrily she had at the time laughed at his vehemence, saying playfully, as she did so,—

"Ah! we are talking of what might have happened more than three centuries ago;" and then, suddenly calling to mind that the subject of conversation might possibly be classed among those which are popularly known as "delicate," she had hastened to give it a less slippery turn. The fact that the story of the "Early" and his ladye-love ended—for all the world like any modern three volume novel-in a marriage between the respective parties, had not escaped Helen Durant's memory; and happening, as was now the case with her, to lift for a moment her dark lashes to her questioner's face, it flashed across her brain—and that with a force of conviction which almost took away her breath—that existence for her, were she never to see again the man whose visits and whose kindly sympathy had

during the last few weeks contributed so greatly to her happiness and comfort, would be well-nigh valueless. The change which this sudden conviction wrought in her countenance must have struck Rowley as being of good omen, for his utterance of the simple monosyllable "Well?" had in it a ring of hopefulness.

"Well," the girl, with an effort to be calm, repeats, "I would answer you at once, only I would like first "-and she stops, blushing painfully, for a pair of dark questioning eyes are very near to hers, and there is that even in the muscular hand that is nervously twisting his heavy moustache, which conveys to her mind a sense of power which fascinates whilst it well-nigh frightens her.

"What would you like first?" he says gently. "But do not—pray do not keep

me in suspense. I am a big fellow," he adds, with a smile, "to look at, but you have me in your power, and, as you are morally great, you must be merciful."

The softness of his words and manner reassure her, and this time she succeeds in giving utterance to the sentence which she had commenced.

"I think," she said timidly, "that you should know me better before — before you think so highly of me. In the first place, I am not young. I should by this time have gone through three, if not four, seasons if I had been a London girl."

"Which, thank Heaven, you are not!"
ejaculates Elphinstone fervently. But
Helen, without noticing the interruption,
continues,—"I am more than twenty-one
—two years older than Alfred, and I have
never been to school—never been taught
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anything, and you might find me very stupid. Then there is poor Alf—"

"And what of him, poor lad? He has, as most of us have done, sown his wild oats, but, unfortunately for him, the work was not done prudently and by stealth. He had the misfortune—and a great one it is—to be found out: however, all that is done and over. He will, I am sure, take warning by the past, and refrain in future from any acts of folly such as those which you have had to deplore. With regard to the reasons which you give why I should think twice before undertaking the task of entreating you to be my wife, I can only say that your reasons are all in favour of my determination to, if possible, succeed. To begin with then, I share to the full my sex's horror of a young ladies'

school. I have no weakness for highlyeducated girls, and I consider that if you had been a year less in age than twentyone, you would have been too young for me. In my opinion, ten years is exactly the amount of difference in age which ought to exist between husband and wife. And now, having answered all your objections, I shall return to my question, and ask you, not whether you will be my wife, but whether you think that you will ever learn to love me."

She held her breath hard for a moment, and then looking up bravely into his handsome, determined face, she said quietly,—

"I can-I know that I can! I think if I were never to see you again, that I should break my heart."

Then he took her into his arms, and covered her sweet blushing face with fervent kisses.

"My darling," he said, as the girl blushingly freed herself from his embrace, "you must forgive me. It is so long since I have touched a woman's lips with mine; and the taste is very sweet. You do not know how I have hungered for you. I longed to speak, yet dared not. I feared that the very thought of love would startle you into a refusal of my prayer; and now that in your angel's breast I have discovered a warm and passionate heart, I must endeavour not to frighten you with the exuberance of my joy."

His arm is round her waist, for he has thrown himself on the couch beside her, and he is feasting his imagination on the shy happiness which he fancies is traceable beneath her lowered lids, when she, looking down upon the small hands that are clasped upon her lap, says,—-

"I cannot think what sudden impulse it was that made me speak so boldly. I ought, I suppose, to feel ashamed of my behaviour just now. You would respect me more, perhaps, if I had not said 'yes' so quickly."

"I doubt it, sweetest," he, pressing her more closely to his heart, replies. "You had looked long enough the beautiful statue which I now know you are not; and do you think it gives me no happiness to find that touch of mine has warmed my Galatea into life? But now," he said, looking hurriedly at his watch, "I must leave, you darling, till to-morrow, for I have an appointment which has to be kept, with the Colonel. You must tell me though, before I go, whether you think I can speak to your mother to-morrow of our engagement. She looks so weak and

delicate, and I hardly know yet-she is so different from some other mothers I have known—whether our news will give her joy or sorrow."

"I must prepare her gently," Helen says, "for she is sadly nervous, to hear that for the first time in my life I have acted without asking her advice; but she likes you so much, and you have been so good, that I feel sure she will forgive me—"

"She must, for I shall love her like a son;" and having so said, the Adjutant (his sweetheart the while looking on with the pride of another Andromache at the proceedings of her soldier lover) buckled on the sword which on his entrance he had deposited in a corner, and, after a true lover's au revoir to his betrothed, he went his way, the click-clack of his spurs sounding, after he had closed the

door, like a pleasant omen in the ears of the happy girl he had left behind him. And if she in her glad surprise was happy, how much the more reason had Elphinstone, in that he had not only found his ideal, but had secured to himself the prize, to rejoice over his success. He had, during his frequent visits of inquiry at the Shanty, taken every opportunity of studying Helen's character_and disposition, and he had found in them no flaw. The widow and her daughters had lived for years in close and economical retirement. Their acquaintances had been few and harmless, whilst the girls had, owing to the remoteness of their dwelling from the haunts of men, been saved from the contamination of sensational novel reading. But there were other causes, still more potent, according to Rowley's

thinking, than these, for the self-congratulation which filled his breast. His Helen's form was exquisitely moulded—a fact which her well-fitting dresses sufficiently disclosed—and it gladdened her lover's heart to think that the lovely arms and perfect bust of his affianced wife had never yet, save when "robed and crowned with chastity," and draped with womanly decorum, been gazed upon by mortal man. The somewhat singular manner in which Helen had received his proposals had been also very satisfactory to Rowley; for he had found but little trouble in convincing himself of what was indeed the fact, namely, that, unguessed at by the innocent girl herself, he had been, since his first introduction, gradually finding a resting-place in the deep recesses of her heart.



CHAPTER XIII.

THE MAJOR FEELS HIS WAY.

that you are in for being on visiting terms with Major Brereton. Collington has written, asking me to be civil to him. He is some distant connection, it appears, of Lady C——'s, so I have asked him to dinner on Thursday. The party will be a large one, so you need only just be civil to him, and there will be an end of it."

"An end of it indeed!" repeated Florence to herself, when Sir Wilfred, after

giving his wife this unwelcome piece of intelligence, left her to her own reflections. "Oh, how I wish there would be, and that Wilfred was not so dreadfully watchful and keen-sighted! Disliking the man as he does, he will be all the more on the qui vive, and ready to see anything in the wretch's manner which is calculated to give offence; and oh! what shall I do if Brereton should take it into his head to be impertinently familiar?"

Sir Wilfred Gregorie was a man of small stature—his height scarcely reaching to five feet nine inches—but he held his well-poised head with such an aristocratic air, his manner of speech was so decided and incisive, and his eye-with its look of keen penetration—seemed so formed—like that of Jove—to "threaten

and command," that no one ever dreamt of making comparisons to his disadvantage, between the Colonel and any one of his six-feet high subordinates, of whom there were several in the battalion. Florence Gregorie loved her husband dearly, but even her "perfect love" could not succeed in casting out the fear in which she stood of him.

Amongst those who were invited to meet Major Brereton was Guy Leycester. The two men happened almost at the same moment to be ushered into the room at the door of which Lady Gregorie was stationed to receive her guests; and she—being on the watch for possible coming events—was struck by the peculiar expression of Guy's countenance, as he made his graceful salaam. It was a look, as he fixed his eyes on her pale and

slightly-agitated face — in which combined the elements both of anger and compassion, the former feeling beingas he fancied — directed against Major Brereton, as he (the Major), whilst retaining his position near the mistress of the house, made repeated and conspicuous efforts to draw her into conversation. This, however, the party being a large one, was not easily done, the task being rendered still more difficult by Lady Gregorie's persistent endeavours to keep him at a distance. At length, after the men had joined the ladies in the drawing - room, the perseverance of Major Brereton was crowned with success. He had been amongst the first to enter, and Lady Gregorie chancing to be for the moment alone, he approached, and in a low voice accosted her.

"At last I see you, Florence," he whispered, "but it is by chance and not by favour. You know how much I have longed to talk to you. I have sent messages to you by your friend, and you have treated both them and me with scorn, and now—"

"Now I can hear no more," Florence retorted. Her face was pale to the lips, with anger and deadly fear, as she, in the same low tone, replied, "You can say anything you wish to Miss Vidal, and I will send an answer to what you ask; but, for God's sake, leave me now! You do not seem to understand," she, with increasing agitation added, "that my husband would kill you if he saw you speaking to me like this."

There was an ugly sneer upon his face as he saw her preparing to move away, and his last words came with a sibilant sound from between his clenched teeth.

"Well, if your lawful possessor should take such an idea into his head, he shall know before I die that he was not his wife's first love."

Fortunately for Lady Gregorie, Sir Wilfred had been detained by a buttonholding bore at the further end of an adjoining room, and had been thus prevented from being a witness of the extraordinary emotion betrayed by his wife during the short conversation with Major Brereton, which that enemy to her peace forced her to undergo; but there was one —Guy Leycester, to wit—who, during the continuance of the scene, had placed himself, in so far as he could venture so to do, between his Colonel's wife and danger, and who, having noted the agonised expression of the harassed woman's face, had mentally vowed to be her champion.

"You are tired, Lady Gregorie," he, in the languidly-deferential manner which women found so charming, said. "It must have been that awfully hot sun at you the Inspection to-day, which knocked up."

"I daresay; my head aches frightfully," she rejoined, and looked so on the point of falling, that Guy drew a chair towards her, and, seating himself near to it, said, in a voice which long practice rendered indistinct to all save the person especially addressed,—

"You have been bored by the man who has just left you. He is a cad of the worst description, and as I happen to know something of his antecedents, I might be able—with your permission, of course—to save you from further annoyance. It is a subject into which I could not enter now, but if I were to see you alone-"

"Or with Emily Vidal? Would not that be better?" suggested Florence hurriedly. "She is my friend, and very clever. Yes, you are right; Major Brereton has been worrying me, but I cannot allow you," she added, looking with lovely, pleading eyes into his face, "to get into trouble on my account."

His thin lip curled scornfully as he rebutted the idea which Lady Gregorie's words suggested.

"I think," he said, "that in this case I can hold my own. However, as you will not, or cannot—being en puissance de mari-grant my request, I-for the reason partly that I owe the man a grudge—shall take an opportunity on my own account of having it out with him. You may trust me entirely, for I will be on my guard against any idiotic notions which people may take into their heads about yourself." And Guy, having so said, lounged away to talk to the pretty wife of a rich Broadmere ironmaster, who evidently fully appreciated the honour he was doing her.

Meanwhile Major Brereton had, out of hearing of the rest of the guests, taken possession of a chair, which Miss Vidal had cleverly contrived to keep vacant for him.

"You have had, I fear, rather a stormy interview," said the young lady playfully. "I almost wonder that you ran the risk. Sir Wilfred is not the kind of man to take things coolly, and her ladyship's VOL. I.

countenance as you talked to her was very betraying. I was thankful that the Colonel was otherwise employed, and did not see how white and terrified she looked."

Major Brereton made no comment on this exordium. For reasons best known to himself, he could not afford to waste time on purposeless discussions regarding a woman's nervous agitation. His opportunities for consulting Miss Vidal on the subject of ways and means were few, and had to be taken advantage of, therefore he said, in a veiled tone, and tentatively,—

"Money is a thing one hates to talk about, Miss Vidal, and I am sure you will agree with me that it never ought to be mixed up with sentiment. I am sorry, of course, to have distressed Florence, but my rascal of a lawyer—"

"Yes; I know all that," Em said impatiently, for the man's roguery and scheming disgusted her, even while she was tacitly acting as an intermediary in an affair which she had been quick-witted to at once perceive was shady in the extreme.

There followed, after the girl's unceremonious interruption, a dialogue between
the pair, in which the affair of the
diamonds was fully discussed. The worth
of those which were to be put into Major
Brereton's possession was, Miss Vidal informed him, four hundred pounds; and
they (the jewels) would, she said, be
placed in a certain spot, the locality of
which she made clear to him, provided
always that Lady Gregorie's letters, which
he had been entrusted to bring with him,
were given in the first place into her

(Emily's) safe custody. Now this arrangement was far from being altogether satisfactory to Brereton. He would have greatly preferred ascertaining for himself the value of the jewels before the letters—which he looked upon in the light of bank notes left his hands; on two points, however, Miss Vidal showed herself absolutely determined not to yield. She would first obtain possession of the letters, and she would not be made a catspaw of by Brereton. The diamonds should be purloined—as she boldly called the transaction—by himself. His would be the benefit, she urged, and it was only right that he should incur the risk.

For a short while he deliberated, turning over in his mind the pros and cons of the case, and then—repeating to himself more than once the popular truism

of "nothing venture nothing have"—he elected to deliver up Lady Gregorie's letters.

"They are short," he said, with a sneer, as he took them from the breast-pocket of his regimental jacket, "but very sweet, and you may tell her, with my love, that I was sorry to part with them."

With these words he left her, and Emily, clutching the closed envelope in her hand, forgot, for a few moments, the expediency of opening it. She had been bewildered by the rapid occurrence of events which had lately taken place. The conduct of her male coadjutor—which, after all, was scarcely more shameful than her own—filled her with horror, and she forgot for a moment the extreme probability that he would have been unable to resist the temptation of keeping back one

of the letters as a reserve fund in the event of future pecuniary difficulties. This supplementary act of meanness he had not, however, been guilty of, and Em, as, from her quiet position near a heavy portière, she watched the movements of the man who she knew to be so consummate a rascal, wondered greatly at the careless ease with which he moved from group to group, now admiring the bouquet of a pretty, laughing girl, and anon complimenting a married performer on the beauty of the song with which she had just been favouring the company. At length he approached the door, and in another moment would—Emily tremblingly told herself—be within a few yards of the big open-mouthed pot-pourri jar in which he had been told to seek his treasure. As she pictured to herself his

stealthy progress down the stairs, her heart beat almost to suffocation within her bodice. It was in vain she told herself that it was for Florence's sake that she had taken a part in this vile transaction. Conscience was making of her a sorry coward, and her fear lest one of the servants at least—if not one of the Colonel's guests—might witness the man's proceedings, grew to fever heat.

But she need not have been alarmed. The upstairs company were too busy listening to, and increasing the busy hum of men and women, to attend to the unpopular Major's proceedings, whilst the domestics below were probably feasting on the remains of the excellent dinner which had been provided for their "betters." The door had closed upon the guilty man, to whose example her own

fall was, she told herself, due, and not a sound, intently as she listened, had met Then an idea—born of her her ears. great relief from nervous strain—occurred to her. It was not too late—in her case —for repentance; she might, whilst placing the recovered letters in her friend's hands, whisper to her at the same time the welcome news that all her diamonds had not passed into the enemy's possession.

"It was a foolish trick of mine," she might say, "to frighten you. The rivière was worth—so Mr Salter said—the money, and here is your *pendant*, worth two hundred pounds, come back to you, and you must forgive me for my childish trick."

For a short while after coming to this almost resolve to act uprightly, Vidal felt happier than she had done for days; but then came a reaction. There was a milliner's, to say nothing of a bootmaker's, bill to pay, and Em's allowance for toilette expenses had already been in a great measure forestalled. Mr Vidal—a man who never denied himself an enjoyment which his limited means permitted him to indulge in—was apt to turn very rusty when his timid, and often-ailing wife ventured to beg a few pounds of him for the adornment of her girls; and Emily lived in dread of the family scene which his discovery of the truth concerning her extravagance might occasion. The two hundred pounds which lay almost within her grasp, would be to her a blessing beyond price, whilst Florence would never miss the sum which would set her (Emily) free from daily and nightly care and worry. The deed would be a terribly dishonourable onethe girl did not shut her eyes to that fact—but then her need was great, and Florence would—the girl felt convinced if she were made acquainted with that need, come at once to her friend's relief. It was too soon, however, even if Em could have brought herself to act a beggar's part, to seek the assistance of the rich and generous woman she was about to wrong, and therefore it fell about that the girl, after a fierce inward battle with her better self, yielded to the sin that was besetting her!

The sight of Lady Gregorie's joy when she received the letters, and the warmth of her grateful expressions to the friend who had so successfully carried out the hateful task which she had undertaken, reconciled Emily in some degree to herself. Surely, she thought, some recompense was due to her for the zeal which in the service of her hostess she had displayed. Her stolen interviews with Major Brereton were not only odious but might have given rise to scandal. All this risk she had incurred, and—on the principle that the labourer is worthy of his hire — she deserved — she strove hard to convince herself—a proportional reward.

On the following morning, Guy Leycester and Major Brereton happened, greatly to the satisfaction of the former, to come across each other. It was in the yard of a horse-dealer and livery stablekeeper in Broadmere that the accidental meeting took place. A charger, which neither of the men had much idea of purchasing, was to be sold by auction in the yard; and after the sale was over,

Leycester, when well out of hearing of the hangers-on, said to Major Brereton,-

"Can you give me a few minutes' conversation, Major, outside, before we return to barracks? There is a trifling subject which I should like to discuss with you."

"All right!" was the apparently carelessly-spoken reply, and then the two men, one of whom was conscious of undergoing a certain amount of inward trepidation, walked away together.

"I think it best," said Guy, "to do a disagreeable thing—if one has it to do at once. A kid hates swallowing a dose of nasty physic, but the longer he holds his nose over it, the more he will set himself against it. Now, the long and the short of this matter is, that last week, at that confounded garden-party,

I was at the other side of the thick yew-hedge whilst you and Miss Vidal were holding a palaver, and I heard every word you both said."

"Which was a cursed mean thing to do, and I wonder you like to own to it," rejoined his companion imperturbably.

"Well, perhaps it was, but that's neither here nor there. I heard a lady's name mentioned, and as it seemed to me that you have her in a fix, it occurred to me to try and get her out of it. It appears that you have got possession of this lady's letters—we won't mention names, if you please, just now—and that you won't give them up without a consideration in the shape of money. Now, I don't know whether you understand French, but this comes under the head of what they call over there chantage,

and renders you liable to an action for felonv."

Brereton, although he was, at Guy's opening words, taken terribly aback, had now, to a certain extent, contrived to pull himself together, and had made up his mind that a bold denial of facts would be his best and safest plan. Miss Vidal, in the event of matters coming to an issue, could be, he thought, safely depended on as a witness in his favour, and therefore he said, with an assumption of injured innocence, by which Guy was not in the least deceived,—

"I have not an idea of what you are talking. Some fellow—the thing is not uncommon—may have been written to by a woman, and, if he happens to be hard up, which is also a case of common occurrence, he may have been tempted

to do a confoundly blackguard thing, and go in for what is called, as I have heard, hush-money; but why you should take it into your head that I am the scoundrel whose conversation you took the trouble to listen to, I can't for the life of me conceive. Anyway, your assumption that I am capable of acting like a scoundrel is an affront—I might almost say an insult—which, in my opinion, calls on your part for an apology, and an apology I therefore demand from you."

The tone taken by the Major is so insolent in its firm denial of what Guy is perfectly convinced are simple facts, that for a moment he feels at a loss how to proceed. Brereton's voice is, however, a peculiar one, and, moreover, Lady Gregorie's agitation whilst subjected to his

evidently unwelcome attentions, is, together with her admission to him (Guy that she has suffered annoyance at Brereton's hands, additional proof, if any were wanting, that the man has uttered falsehoods. After a second or two, therefore, given to reflection, he says, with decision.—

"I decline, Major Brereton, to offer you any apology until I am well convinced that I have made a mistake. Such, at present, is so far from being the case that I shall wish you 'Good-morning;'" and so saying, Captain Guy, in his accustomed graceful fashion, touches his forage cap with his riding-whip, and lounges slowly away towards the barracks.

END OF VOL. I.

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